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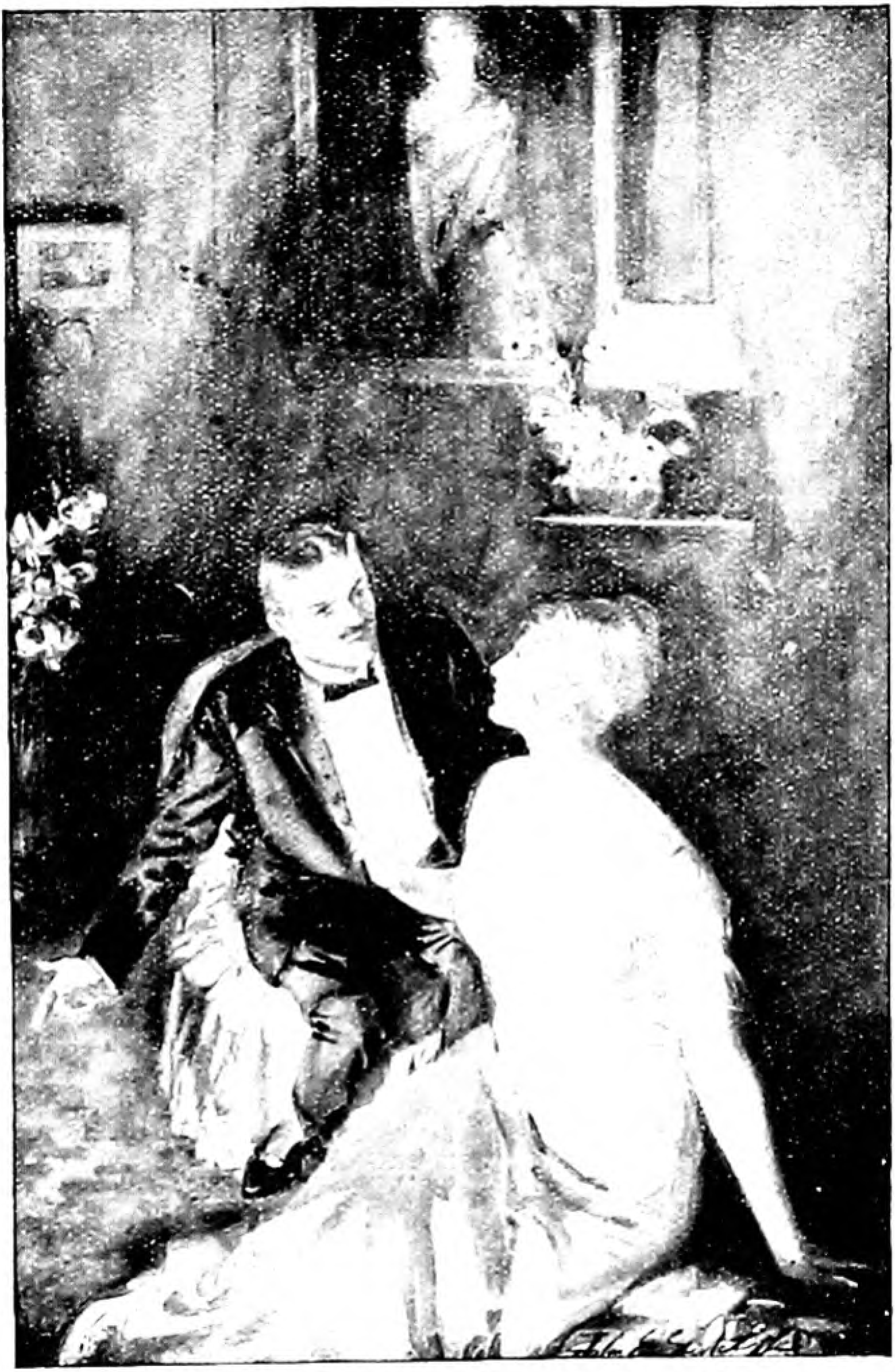
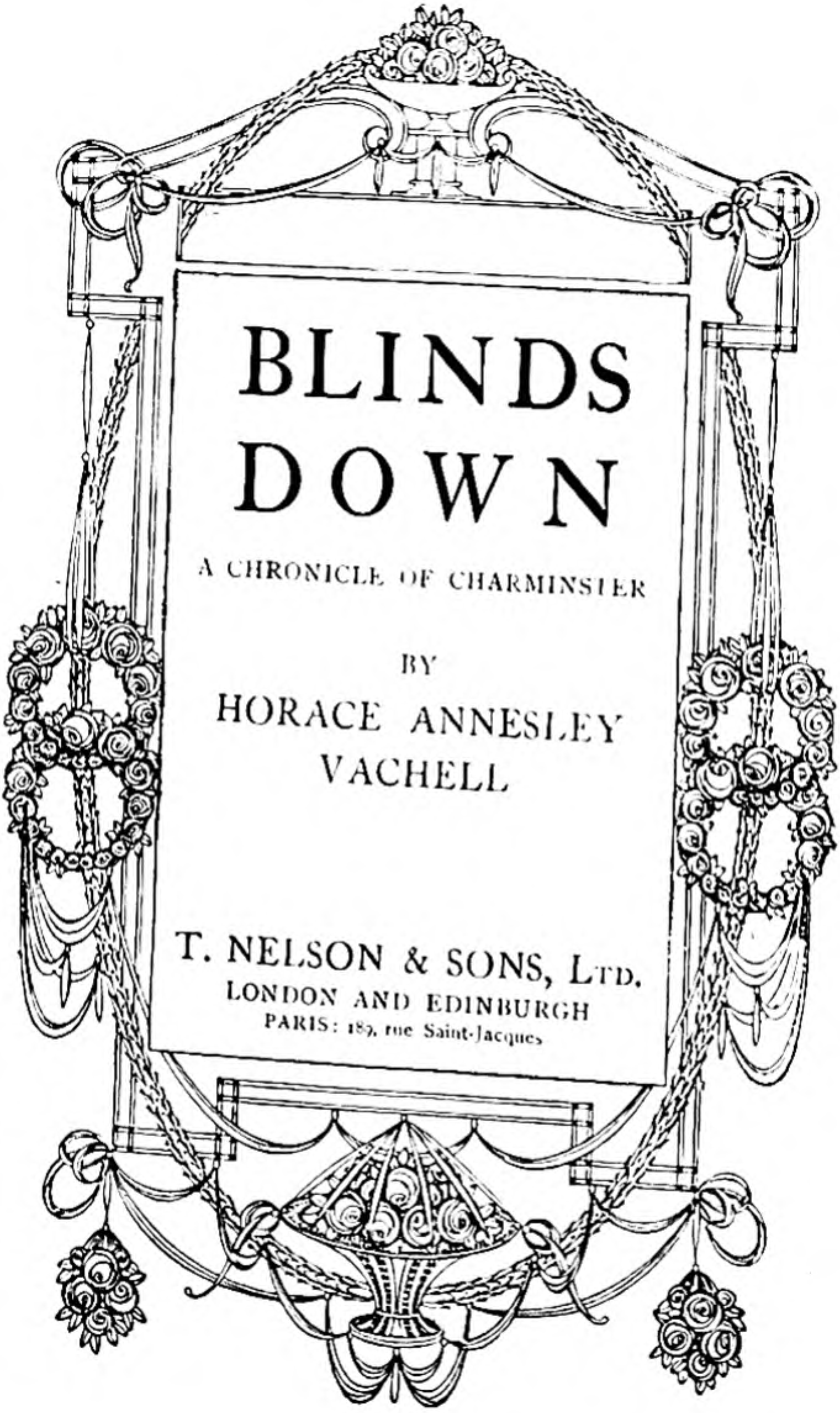


"Will you marry me?" Victor asked suddenly.



BLINDS DOWN

A CHRONICLE OF CHARMINSTER

BY

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

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TO MY FRIEND

ROSE CHAMPION DE CRESPIGNY

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THE BOOK OF ROSETTA

CHAPTER I

THE HONOURABLE MISSES MAULEVERER

ROSETTA was addressing her two sisters. The elder ladies sat rigidly upright in the chairs used by them alone. Rosetta had perched herself upon the arm of an easy-chair, the only easy-chair in that prim room, a very large comfortable chair sacredly preserved because the father of the three sisters had sat in it and died in it. Rosetta, however, knew nothing of this grimly particular fact. She supposed that her father, whom she could hardly remember, had passed away—Prudence's word—in the immense four-poster upstairs.

"I dreamed," said Rosetta, in a clear musical voice, "that I went to Windsor Castle to see the Queen."

Miss Mauleverer nodded solemnly, with a side glance at a large framed photograph of Her Gracious Majesty which stood upon a writing-table.

"Very interesting," she said approvingly.

Rosetta laughed, and the faintest of frowns seemed to flicker across her eldest sister's smooth forehead. Jacqueline saw it, and murmured protestingly: "Why do you laugh, child? The day will come, I hope, when you will be properly presented; and that is no laughing matter, is it, sister?"

"I was so terrified that I tripped over my train," replied Miss Mauleverer.

"In my dream," continued Rosetta, "I had no train to trip over. I walked in as if I were calling upon Mrs. Pogany, and as equally sure of a hearty welcome. The Prince of Wales and the rest of the Royal Family were there—quite a cosy party. I felt absolutely at home. I recognised them all."

She paused, glancing round the room at the collection of Royal photographs, each adequately framed according to the table of precedence. The frame that encompassed the Heir Apparent had cost three shilings and fourpence more than the one which held the Duke of Connaught.

"A delightful dream," murmured Jacqueline. "I have been told," she added, in the reverential tone which she used when repeating certain clauses of the Litany, "that in the intimacy of the Royal circle there is an agreeable freedom from formality and restraint. Did Her Majesty speak to you, dear?"

"She said, 'Hullo, Rosetta, I'm so glad to see you.' And then she kissed me very affectionately."

"Dear me!"

"And then"—Rosetta gurgled with laughter —"I made an appalling discovery: I hadn't a rag on."

The sisters exchanged horrified glances. The elder said, "Rosetta!"

"But I hadn't. And this is the extraordinary thing—I was naked but unashamed. It makes one blush now——"

"I should hope so," interrupted Jacqueline. "You have not told this dream to anybody else?"

"Not yet. I'm sure it would make Doctor Pogany laugh."

"You are fifteen," observed her elder sister, with a note of austerity, "and still singularly young for your years. I must repeat what I told you only last Friday, that there are certain things which gentlewomen do not mention." She paused, and added with a delicate blush: "Nudity, child, is one of them."

Rosetta pouted.

"We come naked into the world and——"

"That will do." Miss Mauleverer held up a restraining hand, and Rosetta skipped through the window which opened upon the lawn. The sisters heard her gay laugh outside. Miss Mauleverer rose with dignity and closed the window. Jacqueline, guessing what was coming, laid down her tambour-frame. Prudence coughed; then she said with finality:

"The dear child is extraordinarily unlike—us."

Jacqueline had occasional inspired moments.

"That," she observed tenderly, "is the reason why we love her so much."

The Honourable Misses Mauleverer were the daughters of the seventeenth Lord Mauleverer, who horrified his county by marrying late in life a young person whose means were as slender as her waist, and whose position and birth entitled her to what she was able to earn as a nurse—about a pound a week. Sweetly dimpled, with a milkmaid's colouring, and very intelligent, she nursed Lord Mauleverer through a long and tedious illness, exhibiting exemplary patience and good temper. The man of fifty fell in love with his nurse, and, seemingly, she fell in love with him. She died a year after her marriage in giving birth to Rosetta, and, in and about Charminster, church-goers affirmed solemnly that this premature decease must be regarded as a "judgment."

From the moment when their father had announced his approaching marriage, the Misses Mauleverer had accepted the situation. They looked upon it with eyes half-veiled by heavy lids. Very rarely were those lids raised. One had the conviction that the ladies dared not stare at either people or things for fear of seeing too much. Each possessed—as far as it went—remarkably clear vision. For instance, they knew that their stepmother had no taint—as many hinted—of the adventuress. She could behave, and did behave, like a gentlewoman, being by nature trustful, sincere, kind, and modest. Upon these shining qualities the Misses Mauleverer fixed their eyes. They chose to ignore the fact that their stepmother was the daughter of a Radical Nonconformist tradesman, who had passed through the Bankruptcy Court and thence into the Highgate Cemetery. Nevertheless, between themselves, they alluded to their father's second wife as "that woman."

At the time of his second marriage, in the late fifties, Lord Mauleverer had let Mauleverer Court and removed to the old Georgian Dower House in Charminster, in which he died, when Rosetta was four years old. He had always been a poor man, and at his death the family estates passed with the title to a second cousin, always spoken of by the Misses Mauleverer as "the Head of our Family." The ladies owned the Dower House and a modest income of eight hundred pounds a year.

Prudence considered her sister's remark.

"That is quite true," she said presently. "I confess it had not occurred to me. Yes, there is a charm about unexpectedness."

They smiled bleakly at each other, in terror of wagging too loose a tongue, hugging a silence dear because it had been preserved so immaculate. Both ladies had inherited the pale soft blue eyes of the Mauleverers. At the Court, generations of Mauleverers, men and women, painted by Van Dyck, by Lely, Reynolds, and Gainsborough, looked down upon the visitor with this same placid but sympathetic glance. Rosetta, however, displayed full brown orbs, sparkling with flames of interrogation, opening them wide to this astonishing world. If her sisters conveyed the impression that they deliberately chose to see less than half of what might come within their vision, Rosetta as deliberately impressed the beholder as passionately eager to see everything within the field of normal vision and also what lay beyond. It was certain that sooner or later she would clamour for a telescope. Her sisters confessed, almost shamelessly, that they could see nothing through telescopes, absolutely nothing.

As Jacqueline picked up her tambour-frame, Miss Mauleverer added a few qualifying words to her previous statement:

"Although the child is a creature of surprises, I feel sure of her innate goodness of heart. She may do much that is unexpected, never anything really wrong."

"Never, sister."

"I have thought sometimes," continued Prudence, dropping her voice, "that if I had married I should have wanted a child just like Rosetta."

"I have thought that too," admitted Jacqueline.

They blushed very delicately, gazing at the roses upon the carpet, sensible, perhaps, that the roses of this world had not bloomed for them. The men of their own class had neglected the rather dull daughters of an impecunious peer. Other men, and there had been others, were stamped at first gaze as—impossible! Doctor Pogany, for example. As a young man he had dared to lift his eyes to Jacqueline—! He was now their medical attendant, and the father of nine little Poganies—a round, rosy, most respectable practitioner. It seemed incredible to think that he had dared. And yet the wonderful fact invested him still with a glamour of romance. Jacqueline would never forget that she had stirred the pulses of one man. Prudence, also, had stirred pulses. Jacqueline remembered two enamoured curates. One was dead, and the other a bishop—only a colonial bishop, to be sure, but entitled to wear gaiters.

The room in which the sisters sat overlooked the garden. Beyond the garden was a paddock which sloped prettily to the river Char. Beyond the river again were other fields of a parklike character, so that it was possible to forget the town altogether, and to believe fondly that their nice old house formed the centre of a large domain exclusively Mauleverer. Upon the other side, unhappily, the house faced a somewhat mean street, known as Hog Lane. Indeed, the Charminster townspeople of the better sort had, so it seemed, respectfully withdrawn from the representatives of the most ancient family in the county. The more desirable residences, as the Mayor (who was also a Real Estate Agent and Surveyor) put it, lay to the west of the town upon the higher ground, and Hog Lane, a name that never passed the lips of Prudence, had been abandoned to the lace makers and the factory hands in the glove factories. Because of this, and partly perhaps on account of the sun—for the street side of their house faced due south—the Misses Mauleverer insisted that the blinds should be kept down. Nevertheless, sounds penetrated, the shrill scream of a woman or child, the deeper tones of an intoxicated male probably cursing, and in joyous contrast the never-ceasing laughter of the very poor—surely the strangest and most pathetic music in the world.

For many years the elder sisters had conspired together—an almost wordless conspiracy—with the laudable object of shutting out from the vision of Rosetta this seamy side to their house and life. Rarely indeed was Rosetta allowed to pass through Hog Lane. A delightful path, fragrant with meadowsweet and honeysuckle, wandered along the river Char till it met the high-road where little could offend a too-sensitive nostril. Upon each side of the pretty garden were walls bristling with glass, but cunningly concealed by masses of trees and shrubbery. Upon rare occasions a fine carriage drawn by spanking horses might roll up to the front door, and a thundering knock from the hand of a vigorous footman would proclaim the advent of some kinswoman who deemed it a duty to pay a ceremonious call once a year. Such visits were not returned. The Misses Mauleverer remained at home, although they spent one month out of each twelve at the seaside for the sake of the child.

As the ladies gazed at each other in sympathetic silence, the door opened and Crump, the parlourmaid, entered. She was tall, thin, and austere, with a slight cast in the left eye, which conveyed the impression to humorists like Dr. Pogany that she was always attempting to see round the corner, and to take in, so to speak, things and people deliberately ignored by the ladies she served so faithfully. She looked exactly what she was—the family retainer, now almost extinct. I am writing of a day when people verified themselves in their clothes. A housemaid, for instance, taking her afternoon "out," was not ashamed to look like a housemaid, while a *mondaine* like Lady Mauleverer, whom we shall meet presently, displayed no ambition to be mistaken for a *demi-mondaine.* Women of all classes, in brief, were content to remain statements rather than suggestions.

Crump spoke rather breathlessly, and her face was redder than usual. She had a terrible announcement to make—a blow to inflict—and being a good creature tried to soften it.

"We're almost out of candles," she began, but ended gaspingly, "and Anne has run away."

"Run away?" ejaculated Prudence. "What do you mean?"

But as she spoke her eyes wandered to the window, Crump, following this pregnant glance, said hastily:

"Miss Rosetta is at the other end of the garden." She continued with less agitation and more asperity: "Anne left a note for me. Here it is."

Upon a half sheet of cheap notepaper, badly written in pencil, were these words, which Prudence read aloud—

"*I'm off. I carnt stand it no longer, and you know why. Things may be alrite yet, so don't look in the Char for* *Yours truely,*

"EVANGELINE."

When she pronounced the missing housemaid's name Prudence frowned. All things were possible to a servant with such a name. From the first, however, she had been called Anne. Then her features softened. Anne had been ill in bed for two days, and quite evidently pain had driven her distracted. Still, Prudence was hardly able to reconcile this hypothesis with the grim expression upon Crump's face.

"Does she mean that the pain is too severe?"

"She knew that you'd sent for Dr. Pogany."

The sisters stared at each other, puzzled and slightly apprehensive. Jacqueline said nervously: "Why should that upset her?"

Crump opened her lips and closed them. Prudence repeated the question in a different form: "Do you mean that Anne has run away because she is afraid of Dr. Pogany?"

"Looks like it," snapped Crump, standing rigidly at attention, with her thin red hands crossed upon her spotless apron. After a pause, Prudence continued nervously:

"Please tell us why you think that Anne should be afraid of seeing Dr. Pogany?"

Crump moved restlessly, evading the mild glance of her mistress. Then, crimson with indignation, she replied—

"Anne's got into trouble. She never told me, but I guessed it."

"Oh!"

The soft exclamation was compounded of consternation and pity and shame. The ladies' cheeks were pink, their delicate fingers trembled, their eyes, beneath drooping lids, fixed themselves upon the roses of the carpet.

"Poor thing!" murmured Miss Jacqueline, whereat Crump frowned, conscious of a blameless past. And then, to the distress of all three, Rosetta ran into the room. Her quick eyes swooped upon mystery.

"What has happened?" she demanded.

In obedience to a wave of Prudence's hand, Crump left the room.

"How funny you all look!" said Rosetta. "Has Crump just given notice?"

"Sit down, child," commanded Prudence.

As Rosetta did so, the elder sisters exchanged glances and nods. Each lady knew her own and the other's mind. Each was sensible that whatever the other might do or say would be said and done for the good of the child, who was not unreasonably curious and frighteningly intelligent considering her tender years. Prudence said sharply—

"Anne has left this house suddenly, and she will not return to it."

"But Anne is in bed. I saw her after breakfast."

"She has left the house."

"But—why?"

Rosetta asked the question gravely, and for the first time, perhaps, the sisters beheld her as a woman. It flashed into Prudence's mind that here was an opportunity of speaking frankly of things which every woman must know about sooner or later. The truth need not be revealed in its horrid crudity; it would suffice to present it decently garbed, with an allusion to the Fall, and Original Sin. Phrases were forming themselves in Prudence's mind, when she heard Rosetta's innocent voice—

"I am so fond of Anne. She looked so pretty this morning. I kissed her. And she kissed me, and burst into tears; but when I asked her why she cried, she refused to tell me. Of course, she must be in love."

Miss Jacqueline patted her hand in silence, grateful that the task of explanation fell by right to her sister. Prudence said nervously—

"You are not altogether mistaken, Rosetta. And you are old enough to know that love, as you call it, does make some women do very odd things." She spoke slowly and distinctly, picking her way as she went, and blinking at Rosetta because she was unable to meet a singularly clear and candid gaze. She continued: "At your age, naturally enough, you don't know what love is."

"But I do," said Rosetta. "I mean," she added with a laugh, "I know well enough that love, passionate love"—Miss Mauleverer winced—" may drive girls mad. Ophelia, for instance. And I suppose that Hamlet could inspire that sort of madness; but somehow I don't find it as easy to believe that Bert Rockley would have the same effect on Anne."

"Bert Rockley?"

"Anne's young man."

"You knew that Anne had a young man?"

"Why, of course. She told me all about him. I know everything."

Jacqueline grew pale. "Everything!" she murmured. "Heavens!"

"Why do you say 'Heavens'? I've never been in love myself, not properly, but I imagine that the first thing is to have a sympathetic soul to talk things over with. Anne couldn't talk to you two darlings, now could she?"

As the sisters made no reply Rosetta continued eagerly—

"And you couldn't call poor old Crump a sympathetic soul? And cook is quite impossible, except as a cook. So you see there was nobody but me."

"What did Anne tell you?"

"She told me that she loved Bert and that he loved her, and that he would lose his job if he married her. Bert is not beautiful, and, as I say, I can't understand poor dear Anne going mad about him; for, if she can't marry him, she must be quite cracked to leave us. But lately she has been rather funny with me—not herself at all. Do you mean to say that she's left without giving notice?"

"Yes."

"And forfeited her wages?"

"Probably."

"She must be mad."

"You are right, child; that is the most charitable interpretation to place upon her conduct."

"Her misconduct," amended Jacqueline.

Prudence took the hint as delicately as her Persian cat would have taken a morsel of fish from her hand.

"Yes, misconduct. You must understand, Rosetta, that Anne has behaved with—with——"

"No consideration," suggested Jacqueline.

"Thank you, sister—With no consideration whatever, either for us or for herself. We cannot condone what she has done."

"But—if I talked to her?"

"Certainly not. We forbid that. I shall see her myself, and I shall ask the Vicar to speak to the young man. Dismiss Anne from your mind, child."

"But I can't. Poor Anne! She has such nice eyes—so appealing. I am very sorry for her—aren't you?"

The sisters made no reply. And their silence sent the blood rushing into Rosetta's dimpled cheeks, and into her pretty eyes flashed tiny flames of indignation. Comparing the child with her half-sisters, so austerely placid, it was hard to believe that their too sluggish blood moved so swiftly in her veins.

"You must promise us, child, that you will not go to Anne."

Rosetta tossed her head.

"If I must, I must."

She gave a defiant little laugh, and then, with tears in her eyes, ran from the room. Prudence murmured distressfully—

"To think, Jacqueline, that she should have kissed that abandoned creature!"

CHAPTER II

SEPTIMUS INTRODUCES HIMSELF

ROSETTA learned later that Anne, who had behaved with such a shameless lack of consideration, had married her Bert and gone with him to Canada. The incident, therefore, was regarded as closed. Nevertheless, it remained in her memory as a faint blur upon her vision of the two persons whom she regarded as the best and kindest in the world. She told herself at the time that she could not understand her sisters, and beheld them during a few horrid hours as unjust and uncharitable. Long years afterwards, she was able to look back and realise that this was the first of other misunderstandings and perplexities, the beginning of an inevitable end.

During the summer, moreover, she dimly apprehended the existence of what appeared to her young mind to be a comical conspiracy on the part of neighbours and friends to preserve, so to speak, the Misses Mauleverer from everything and everybody likely to offend their delicate susceptibilities. The sisters had many neighbours, but few friends. Dr. Pogany and the Vicar were amongst the latter, although Mrs. Pogany, the daughter of the Charminster banker, remained a mere acquaintance. The Vicar's wife, Mrs. Lovibond, was, in point of fact, the only lady in Charminster upon terms of real intimacy with Lord Mauleverer's daughters, being indeed remotely of kin to them, and distinguished by an aquiline nose rightly considered to be as good as a patent of nobility.

Rosetta adored Mrs. Lovibond, and ran in and out of the Vicarage at her pleasure. From Mrs. Lovibond she learned of the comical conspiracy.

"You know, Rosetta," the Vicar's wife had said, "that your dear sisters are the most wonderful people."

"But why?"

Mrs. Lovibond laughed and tapped the girl's cheek. Then, with a not unhappy inspiration, she pointed to a cabinet which held under lock and key some beautiful cups and saucers of early Worcester, the only articles of real value in the shabby Vicarage. Rosetta, long before this talk, had been taught to admire the dainty decoration, the delicate gilding, the indescribable charm and grace of these fine specimens. In the same cabinet was a plate from the same factory, but potted and decorated at a much later period. Mrs. Lovibond, who could preach a better sermon than her husband, liked to contrast the refinement of the old with the too lavish gaudiness of the new, which she stigmatised as "flashy." And she would generally add with a sigh: "They can't reproduce the old paste, or the melting glaze, or the mellow tone."

"Look at my china," she said to Rosetta.

"I love to look at it."

"It was made to be looked at. If you examine the gilding at the bottom of the cups you will see that they have not been used. My great-grandmother, to whom they were given, never used them. They have always been kept under lock and key. Well, my dear, your sisters are like my china, and we all know it. We keep them under lock and key. Charminster is immensely proud of them, but it admires at a respectful distance."

"I see."

"I wonder whether you do see. It's not easy to make young people see the beauty of a fine paste. The eye must be trained, and the sure touch, also, is a matter of training. But don't you *feel* that your sisters are quite different from, let us say, you and me?"

"It seems odd that they should be, but I admit they are."

"Here in Charminster we have always known that they were different, and we have governed ourselves accordingly."

Rosetta laughed.

"Now I think of it, Dr. Pogany has a very loud voice, because Mrs. Pogany is rather deaf. He shouts at me as if I were deaf too, but he never shouts at my sisters."

"That's it exactly."

"Once I overheard him say to Mrs. Pogany that they must be 'spared.'"

"They have been 'spared.'"

Rosetta laughed again.

"I don't want to be spared. I'm horridly curious. Even butchers' shops don't disgust me. Prudence loathes passing one. I must confess to you that Hog Lane excites me awfully. I'd like to know the people there, to pop into their lives when they weren't expecting me. When we do visit our neighbours, Crump lets them know we're coming, and things are tidied up."

"Things have always been tidied up for them. I tidy my own mind when they come here."

"Is your mind ever untidy?"

"Sometimes."

"How nice of you to tell me that!"

After this talk, Rosetta, ever quick to take a hint, began in her turn to "spare" the two fine specimens of English porcelain. She tried to tidy her mind from no motive save the honourable one of pleasing her kind inspectors. For a season, indeed, the voluble maid became monosyllabic. There was too much "Yes, Prudence—Please, Prudence—I quite agree——" and so forth. The ladies were delighted. Prudence said to Jacqueline: "The dear child is remarkably amenable; I note an improvement in manner and tone. She was getting—hoydenish!" And Jacqueline would murmur in reply: "Yes, sister, there is nothing of that woman in her."

"There is not much," amended Prudence.

One wonders what would have happened had the ladies been privileged to overhear Rosetta's talks with Septimus Lovibond, now about to take his degree at Cambridge.

Septimus appealed to Rosetta because he represented excitement and revolt, the tempest in her teapot. Also he was odd to look at, markedly different from the other young men of her acquaintance. He despised what was known in those days as "the crutch-and-toothpick brigade," speaking of them scathingly to Rosetta as the "la-di-da lot!" He had shocked the Tories of Charminster, and in particular his own father, by professing himself a Radical. The Misses Mauleverer were "spared" this dreadful knowledge. To Rosetta alone Septimus let himself go—an irresistible form of flattery. Whenever he said in his somewhat harsh tones, "Look here, Rosetta, I tell this to you. I wouldn't dare say it to anybody else," she would thrill with delight and satisfaction, looking up into his strong face with beaming eyes and lips tremulously apart, revealing her small, even teeth.

Add to this the knowledge common to each of a tremendous secret; for when Septimus became head of the Charminster Grammar School he had said to Rosetta, even then his adoring slave: "How old are you?" She had replied shamefully, "I'm thirteen," hastening to add, "of course I feel years older." To this, after piercing examination, Septimus replied: "In seven years' time I shall marry you." With an absence of maidenly modesty which would have overwhelmed her sisters, Rosetta exclaimed: "Oh, Septimus, you are a sweet boy!" And he had quenched ardour by remarking in a hollow voice: "I am a man. Don't gush!"

Their love-making, if you can call it such, was of the most prosaic character. For example, Septimus had never kissed her, and if he wrote to her—a rare event—his letters began "Rosetta," and ended "Yours faithfully." But somehow the child divined that he was faithful, and that she belonged to him.

He talked to her alone of his ambitions, which

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mounted into the highest heaven. He had won a scholarship at Cambridge, the first rung in the ladder. A fellowship might follow, and then journalism. Later on—the House of Commons! A fellow should be able to use his pen mightily. The pen, nowadays, overturned dynasties. Billy Russell had destroyed a Government. And look at Delane! What a power! Omnipotence achieved with a quill! His favourite expression during his first year at Cambridge echoed often in Rosetta's ears:

"I shall smash idols."

He smashed some of Rosetta's graven images, and filled her mind with ebullient ideas barely draped in rough words. He detested humbug and hypocrisy and snobbishness, exclaiming fiercely: "Away with that! Throw him" (some curate, perhaps) "to the lions!"

He declaimed verse that pleased him, and passages from the great orators. Rosetta would listen breathless with excitement; but she remembered not to gush, and had wit enough to conceal admiration with a "Not half bad, that. You can go it sometimes."

"I mean to go it."

By this time Rosetta was seventeen, and the prettiest girl in Charminster. Her portrait in pastel, done by a French artist who wanted money to return to Paris, exhibits a lovely complexion and large velvety brown eyes and hair. Upon the glowing skin, and into the eyes and hair the painter had expressed the joy in living which so distinguished Rosetta from the prim misses of the country town. Romney's best portraits of Emma Hamilton present the same natural gaiety and bloom, an expression almost pagan in its spontaneity. A month after the pastel was hung in the drawing-room the sisters had begun to reckon it a priceless possession, but at first glance Prudence murmured :

" Is the child really like that ? "

Jacqueline replied :

" I know what you mean, sister ; but she may have looked to the artist like that. He has brought out what *he* sees in her."

Prudence frowned.

" There is certainly a—wildness."

" No, no ; a natural *abandon*."

" She is positively beautiful."

" We have always known that."

Prudence lowered her voice to a whisper :

" The child's beauty is of a character to appeal to—men ! "

" We must be careful. *A propos*——"

" Yes ? "

" She is very intimate with Septimus Lovibond."

" Septimus Lovibond. Yes, yes, he is now a young man. It seems only the other day that I gave him half a crown."

" I thought, sister, at the time—he was then sixteen—that ten shillings would have been more suitable."

" Septimus Lovibond ! Rosetta and he have been as brother and sister, still——! "

" She is so attractive."

" We must be very careful."

They were, of course, much too careful, as will be conceded when their cautionary remarks to Rosetta are recorded. Prudence had times and seasons for everything. About eleven in the morning, for example, when Jacqueline and she had ordered the house to their satisfaction, Prudence read aloud from some serious work generally of an historical character. Lighter reading was continued after tea, but never earlier in the day. At twelve-thirty precisely, when the serious work was laid aside, there was an intermission of a quarter of an hour, when the questions raised in the morning's reading might be profitably discussed. At a quarter to one the sisters retired to their chambers and prepared for luncheon, the principal meal of the day, but never spoken of as dinner.

At twenty-five minutes to one, Prudence laid upon the round table near her chair Motley's "Netherlands," and said nervously:

"Rosetta."

"Yes, sister?"

"Septimus Lovibond spent two hours with you in the garden yesterday afternoon."

"Just one hour and forty-two minutes," said Rosetta. Immediately she blushed, sensible that this meticulous notice of the exact time was significant. The elder ladies perceived the blush.

"And you are in and out of the Vicarage at all seasons."

"Of course."

"There should be no 'of course' about it. You are no longer a child, dear, and we must consider the proprieties."

"But I don't understand. Septimus is our friend and my particular pal."

"Pal? What a word to use!"

"Chum, if you prefer it."

"I do not prefer it. A young woman of seventeen can't be the 'chum' of a young man of twenty-two. It's *inconvenable.*"

"I quite agree," added Jacqueline. "You should make a chum of some young woman of your own age."

"Ugh!" said Rosetta.

"Laura Pogany, for instance——"

"Poor Laura is impossible. She can't help being a fool, but do you think that I could make a chum of a girl who calls a napkin a *serviette?*"

"Perhaps not. There are others."

"Name one," said Rosetta audaciously.

The sisters stared at each other. Prudence said, with a slight asperity:

"There must be a suitable companion of your own sex somewhere in Charminster. Let that pass."

Rosetta followed up her advantage. "Have you anything against Septimus?"

"Nothing; a very worthy young man, but he is odd."

"That's why I like him so much."

"Dr. Pogany speaks of him as an iconoclast."

"That's because Septimus has criticised his methods, which are quite out of date."

"What?"

"Dr. Pogany chooses to ignore the work of the bacteriologists. He can't use a microscope."

"Do Septimus Lovibond and you pass judgment upon the man who brought you both into this world?"

"Why not?"

"Am I to understand that you have discussed with this young man such subjects as," her soft voice trembled, "as—disease?"

"We have talked about bacteriology."

"I am distressed to hear it. A gentlewoman should never talk of medical matters except with her medical attendant. Does Septimus criticise his father also?"

Rosetta bit her lip. Prudence continued gently.

"I infer from your silence that he does."

"Septimus is devoted to his father, but he recognises his limitations as a clergyman of the Church of England."

"Bless me!" ejaculated Jacqueline.

Prudence rose with dignity. "For the future," she commanded firmly, "your intimacy with this young man must be clearly defined and regulated. You will avoid, please, seeing him alone, and without unduly hurting his feelings make him understand that his visits for the future must be of a more ceremonious character."

She went out, followed by Jacqueline.

Next day Rosetta told Septimus what had passed. All things considered, he behaved with moderation.

"I'm a nobody; and how can those dears realise that I'm bound to be somebody."

"It's not that. I was fool enough to let out that we talked about religion and science."

"How indiscreet!"

"Well, you see, I wanted them to know that we didn't prattle about frivolous things only. Yes, I made a sad mess of it."

"And you surrendered?"

"I didn't; but they took surrender for granted."

"And for the future my visits to you are to be ceremonious?"

"I can't see you—ceremonious."

He answered gravely. "From their point of view, they are right. What they think, however, doesn't matter. The interesting question is—what are *you* going to do?"

"I shall revolt."

A rare smile transfigured his face. Long ago Rosetta had decided that Septimus could never be called handsome according to the standard set by the Apollo Belvidere. His features were roughly hewn and irregular, too massive for the popular taste. But his smile was charming—an inheritance from his mother, and essentially feminine and subtle, inspired rather by sympathy than humour. Rosetta had labelled it "romantic."

"I shall revolt," repeated the girl firmly. "I mean to see you wherever and whenever I can."

"Good." The smile vanished, but lively flames danced in his eyes. "We'll plot and plan."

"What fun that will be!"

"It must be done seriously."

"They have always treated me like a daughter rather than a sister."

"They love you devotedly, Rosetta."

"I have been a prisoner, always, always! I have tried hard to hug my chains, but oh! how they have galled me!" She continued impetuously: "A man cannot understand. Yes, they love me, and I love them. That is the tragic part of it. When I'm away from them I seem to see their love so plainly; with them it fades, worn away by a thousand trifling tyrannies. Perhaps that is too strong a word, but ever since I can remember they have insisted, ever so affectionately, but—but——"

"Inexorably?" he suggested.

"That's it—inexorably, that I should share their opinions and prejudices. They have never realised, poor darlings, that I am not really a Mauleverer. My grandfather was a Nonconformist grocer. I dare say he sanded his sugar, and was up to all the tricks of his trade. My sisters would suffer torture rather than mention his name. But he's part of me. I've had to sand my sugar, often and often. I am the Dishonourable Miss Rosetta. There!"

She laughed derisively, but the tears were trickling down her cheeks. Septimus took her hand.

"You are a darling," he said, in his deep voice, "and we must stick together through thick and thin."

Then, without more ado, he took her into his arms and kissed her hair, her wet eyes, and her lips. When he released her, she was blushing vividly, but she whispered:

"I'm so glad you never kissed me before."

All this happened during the Long Vacation, and the lovers met often, and with increasing audacity. In the warm summer evenings the sisters slumbered sweetly, and then Rosetta would steal away to the tryst beside the Char, where she might or might not find Septimus. He was reading hard for his degree, and absorbed by work and ambition. Like most men of his type, he took Rosetta's love for granted. That lay behind everything, but, unfortunately, he did not say so. Rosetta, pining for kisses, received very few, and was too proud to ask for more. He stared at her in amazement, when she said shyly:

"You do love me, Septimus?"

"Of course I love you. But words are detestably cheap. I have to earn you. I haven't a bob of my own."

"I wonder if I have any money?"

"I suppose your father left you something. We ought to look into that. We both know how to scrimp, but I swear I won't marry you till I can give you something more than bread-and-butter. All the same, if you have something of your own, our marriage will take place just so much the sooner. You might pump the sisters."

"I'll try."

She made the attempt a few days later, seizing opportunity when Prudence happened to mention ways and means. It was a fetich with the ladies to observe a reticence which they mentally described as "decent" about money matters. They believed that lucre deserved the adjective "filthy," although they would have been at a sad loss to furnish reasons for such a conviction. It happened that the time had come for the annual jaunt to the seaside.

"We can't afford Bognor this August," Prudence remarked at breakfast, as she measured out three teaspoonfuls of Chinese tea and added one for the pot.

"Why not?" demanded Rosetta.

"You will have to be presented next year. I have written to the Head of our Family about it. Everything is settled."

"It seems rather a waste of money."

Prudence replied firmly:

"It's necessary."

"I'm glad we are not going to Bognor," said Rosetta. "It's heavenly here."

"So it is," Jacqueline murmured, "but the lane is smelly."

"Are we very poor, sister?" asked Rosetta.

Prudence hesitated before she replied austerely:

"We have enough for our needs."

Then Rosetta shut her eyes and plunged:

"Have I anything of my own?"

Her sisters stared at crimson cheeks. Jacqueline gasped. Prudence, in the act of conveying a morsel of bacon to her mouth, laid down her knife and fork. She was about to evade the question, but her sense of justice asserted itself. Nevertheless, she answered coldly:

"You have nothing."

"Oh!"

"I had better tell you the facts, although I am of opinion that you are hardly old enough to hear them, or to understand." She paused to select the right phrase, while Jacqueline crumbled her bread with long, nervous fingers.

"Our father left a certain sum to Jacqueline and me, and upon the income of this we live. I make no doubt, and Jacqueline agrees with me"—she glanced at Jacqueline, who nodded—"that our father would have provided for you had he been able to do so. Our money does not come from him directly, but through him from our mother; and it was so settled in our mother's marriage settlement. Unhappily, your mother had no settlement." Then, in a kind voice, she went on: "Our father knew that we should provide for you, and one day you will have what is ours. You must not blame our father. He was sorely crippled financially."

Rosetta said hurriedly: "Of course I don't blame him; but I hate the idea of wasting your money upon a Court dress and all that."

"It may not be wasted."

As Rosetta lifted a pair of innocent puzzled eyes, Prudence said slowly: "We hope that you will be able to pass a season in London."

"A season in London! But I have no clothes."

"They will be provided."

Then light burst effulgently upon Rosetta. She saw everything in a dazzling moment of revelation. Her sisters had pinched for this; they remained in Charminster, when Hog Lane smelled horribly, for this.

Suddenly she remembered a valuable miniature which had mysteriously vanished. She asked excitedly:

"Oh, Prudence, did you sell the Samuel Cooper miniature on my account?"

Prudence answered stiffly:

"Yes."

Jacqueline added tremulously: "I always disliked that ugly old man in armour."

"It was the pride of your collection," said Rosetta. She jumped up, ran round the table, and flung her arms about the neck of Prudence.

"I owe everything to you," she exclaimed. "How good you have both been! And I've been so ungrateful."

Prudence gently disengaged the clinging arms. Faintly smiling, she said:

"Child, what a creature of impulse you are!" As she perceived that Rosetta was crying, she added hastily: "What—tears! Come, come, we must really practise more self-restraint. Your bacon will be stone cold."

"We have never had better bacon," said Jacqueline, whose own eyes were not entirely free from moisture. Loyally backing up her sister, she concluded: "We wanted to keep these surprises from you."

"I've been a beast," sobbed poor Rosetta. She kissed Jacqueline, disarranging a dainty coiffure, and fled from the room. The sisters shook their heads.

"No restraint, Jacqueline."

"None whatever, sister."

They sighed, as once more they attacked the excellent bacon.

During the next two days Rosetta kept no tryst with Septimus, thereby inflaming his mind to wrath. However, they met ceremoniously upon the Vicarage lawn, and under cover of much prattle Rosetta laid bare a sensitive conscience.

"I feel that I ought to tell them everything."

"That's for you to decide."

"You look so cross."

"I am cross. Do you think Peter jumped for joy when he was robbed to pay Paul? You were pledged to meet me. I have injured my tendon Achilles, kicking my heels for hours waiting for you. I've been unable to work. Perhaps I was a fool to think that I came first."

"You do come first," she whispered. "Oh, how unhappy I am!"

He melted slightly, but not enough.

"All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't keep me from you, Rosetta."

"I have not the heart to deceive the sisters."

"I won't urge you to do anything against your conscience. My own is clear. I've conquered what I regard as sentimental and inherited prejudice. To the Tiber, say I, with those who would keep apart true lovers."

Rosetta smiled faintly.

"You are terrible, Septimus. Fancy throwing those two darlings into the Char! You'd be the first to jump in after them."

"Those two darlings," said Septimus, with grim derision, "would hurl me into the bottomless pit if they knew that I had baulked the dearest wish of their hearts."

"What's that?"

"You have just told me. A season in Mayfair means a grand marriage. You are to be hawked about in the best style. They have cut down everything except their charities for this particular purpose."

"You make me more miserable than ever."

"We must face our experiences, good and bad, and pass through them and beyond them to something else. Otherwise we perish like beasts of the field. To neglect the present opportunity of seeing each other as often as possible would be, in my opinion, idiotic."

"How well you talk, Septimus!"

Septimus smiled modestly. At twenty-two ardent undergraduates, not wholly devoted to the river and playing-fields, are nice in their choice of the right phrase. He continued fluently:

"You have been 'cribbed, cabined, and confined.' Down with your barriers, say I!"

"But I owe my sisters so much; and what can I give in return but obedience?"

"That is the girlish sentimental point of view. You are really very intelligent and sensible, but your common sense is at war with inherited, incoherent instincts and prejudices. These instincts cannot be ignored, but they should be fused—that's the word—with a practical and vivid philosophy of life. I want you to see things as they are. Face the naked truth bravely. I have neither birth, nor position, nor means, and the quality of my brains is known only to myself, my mother, and half a dozen dons at Cambridge. You"—he dropped his voice—"are a peer's daughter, and a match for anybody."

"You think my sisters snobs."

"Not I. There's no snobbery in wishing a pretty sister to make a good marriage. A poor marriage may be a very mean thing. You ought to make a fine match."

"I shall, if I marry you."

"You sweet thing! If you believe that, all is well. It justifies our plotting and planning."

At this interesting point the duologue was broken by Mrs. Lovibond, who was arranging a set of tennis. Rosetta never played tennis, because the sisters were of opinion that games for young gentlewomen led to the forming of undesirable acquaintance. Septimus was led off by his mother, who returned presently, and said gaily:

"Now for a little chat with you."

Rosetta smiled, but evaded a penetrating glance.

"Septimus and you are great friends."

"Oh, yes."

"What do you talk about?"

Rosetta laughed, and consigned to perdition her blushing cheeks. She managed to reply with assumed sprightliness:

"I always insist that Septimus should talk about what interests him most."

"Clever child."

"He is wonderfully eloquent upon his favourite subject."

"Pray, what is that?"

"Himself."

"You little wretch! Do you take him at his own valuation?"

"Of course."

"Septimus may go far, if——"

"Yes."

"If he gives undivided energies to himself. Fortunately, he is not susceptible. The wrong sort of marriage would be his ruin."

"Wouldn't it be anybody's?"

"It would ruin him in particular, because he is really very unselfish, and, if he married, his first thought would be for his wife."

"He might marry a wife with money?"

"That is extremely unlikely. In any case, his father and I hope that he will woo Fortune first. He is so ambitious that failure would destroy him. Dear me! there is Dr. Pogany. I must offer him a cup of tea."

She left Rosetta feeling very uncomfortable.

CHAPTER III

HOG LANE

ROSETTA did not return home by that pleasant path which bordered the river Char. A strong reaction had set in. She was tempestuously enraged with herself and everybody else. She knew that Mrs. Lovibond had peeped into her heart, and she was angry with Septimus for playing tennis instead of talking with her, although, had she been wiser, she would have known that he did so as a matter of duty, because the mater had a first call upon his services, as he would jokingly have put it. In short, civil war raged in her soul, and the issues of battle were doubtful. Accordingly, she chose to walk home through Hog Lane, with a half-defined intention of beholding men and women more unhappy than herself.

To reach the unsavoury lane, she had to pass down the High Street, a delightful thoroughfare lined with ancient houses of all sizes and shapes. The High Street, as Mrs. Lovibond had once observed, was distinguished by what connoisseurs of fine old furniture call "patine." Septimus, the iconoclast, spoke rather contemptuously of "patine" as dirt rubbed into attractive smoothness of surface by the sandpaper of Time.

Rosetta stared scornfully at the mellow buildings constructed for the most part of a beautiful stone which diffused a warm radiance comparable to clouded amber. The evening sun shone upon them, illuminating delicate details of tracery and workmanship. The shadows under the eaves were the colour of heliotrope.

"Hang everything," thought Rosetta, wishing that she could have shouted the words aloud.

She quickened her steps, frowning at the parish church, wherein she had passed so many hours. The sisters were very regular in their attendance. Divine service was to them an act of allegiance to the Almighty. When Rosetta complained of dull sermons, Prudence would reply austerely, "My dear child, we do not go to church to be entertained," and Jacqueline would always add: "Certainly not." As Rosetta passed the north door, she thought: "How I have been bored in there!"

She was feeling desperately wicked, and the feeling was not altogether without enticement.

Tradesmen, taking a mouthful of fresh air after a hot day, saluted her with respect as she hurried by, and their greetings further exasperated this unhappy maid. "How smug they are!" she reflected, and she smiled grimly as she murmured to herself: "I am the dishonourable Miss Rosetta, and no mistake!"

Presently the character of the street began to change as she approached the lower end of it. The houses in this part of Charminster had been suffered to fall into decay. The sun, so happy in revealing the arts and crafts of the Jacobean and Georgian builders, exhibited also the makeshifts and patches of poverty-stricken tenants. Here and there walls were warped, stones or bricks had fallen out, mortar was crumbling away, missing window-panes were replaced by rags or straw. Beholding these, Rosetta smiled less grimly.

Five minutes later she entered Hog Lane.

It happened to be Saturday, and the lace and glove makers had just received their weekly wage. The lane, therefore, was *en fête*. Rosetta remarked that the sexes, with rare exceptions, kept apart. The girls walked together, arm-in-arm, chattering and singing; the men stood in groups, staring at the girls and exchanging pleasantries of a Rabelaisian flavour. At sight of Rosetta tripping daintily through the dust, silence fell upon all, save those far gone in liquor. Some of the men sheepishly touched their caps, but the girls, many of whom had been Rosetta's pupils in Sunday School, maintained a stolid indifference, as if to say, "We don't know you here, Miss."

One young woman, meeting Rosetta's inquisitive glance, curtseyed awkwardly, and was heard to mutter: "Well, I never!" Rosetta said politely:

"I hope you are quite well, Emma."

To this Emma replied bashfully, "Thank you, Miss; I'm as well as I expect to be."

A man standing near, obviously intoxicated, laughed brutally.

"You hound!" said Emma, crimson with fury and defiance.

Rosetta hastened on, wondering what was meant. Emma had been rather a nice girl, but she had not seen her for some time. Her people were very poor and—to use Prudence's word—"godless."

Emma had lost her nice complexion; she looked, poor thing, very coarse and bedraggled. Why had that disgusting man laughed? And why had Emma been roused to such fury?

Her attention was distracted by three girls who were swaggering down the middle of the lane singing at the top of their voices a song at that moment familiar to almost everybody in the kingdom except the protected matrons and maidens. The chorus came distinctly to Rosetta:

> Over the garden wall, the prettiest girl of all;
> I never saw yet such eyes of jet,
> And you may bet I'll never forget
> The night our lips in kisses met—
> Over the garden wall!

It seemed to Rosetta that the girlish voices were raised to a more defiant shrillness as the singers stared at her. She began to wish that she had returned home by the river. Farther down the lane was the notorious John Barleycorn tavern, in and out of which slatternly females were going and coming carrying jugs. Decidedly, Hog Lane was not at its best upon Saturday evening.

Rosetta set her chin at a higher angle as she neared the tavern, compressing her pretty lips. She had no intention of appearing disdainful, but quite unconsciously she had assumed the same expression which lay upon her face when Prudence was reading aloud certain passages in mediæval history which could not well be skipped. A man watching her, a Cockney in Charminster, said to his mate:

"What an 'aughty bit! 'Oo is she?"

"The Honnerable Miss Mauleverer."

" 'Er lidy muvver carn't know she's aht."

Rosetta heard this and was consumed with a desire to slap the insolent stranger's face. But she thought: "I'm glad I came. As Septimus says, 'Facts must be met bravely.' "

However, she breathed more freely as she entered the decorous part of the lane. In curious obedience to that unwritten law in Charminster which preserved the Misses Mauleverer from encroachment of the baser sort, there were no mean buildings near the Dower House. For a hundred yards in front stretched a bleak strip of common, with a stagnant duck-pond in the middle. The cottages, moreover, on each side of the house belonged to the sisters, and were kept in admirable order. Trees had been planted with the intention of blotting out the more sordid aspects of the lane; and this small oasis remained secluded, a sanctuary for lovers after nightfall, but during the day regarded almost as private property through which ran a right of way only to be used when necessary.

Rosetta slackened pace when she gained the trees, and remarked that her heart beat faster than was warrantable.

"Am I a coward?" she asked herself.

She was quite aware that she had seen a bit of the seamy side of life. She had desired to see it and taste it, and the taste remained bitter in her mouth. We know, of course, that she had not seen what older eyes might have perceived. She had not understood the half of what she had heard. Of this also she was sensible as she reflected:

"How little I know really!"

And then for the first time in her life she realised the contrast between her life and the lives of such as Emma, and she wondered with ever-increasing amazement why such cruel contrasts should be, and—necessary corollary to the thought—why such contrasts should be altogether ignored by her sisters, who were neither stupid, nor callous, nor selfish. Unable to sift these first impressions, so vivid and yet so inarticulate, she abandoned the task with the hasty summing-up: " What a muddle it all is, anyway! But I mustn't be late for dinner, even if it is only high tea."

Nevertheless, undeterred by the possibility of rebuke for unpunctuality, she crossed the road to obtain a view of the house. She could not remember having done this before. As an experience it allured her strangely, this new view of the house wherein she had been born, and which some day might indeed belong to her. At once she remarked that the blinds were down. The symbolism of this percolated slowly through the brain-cells.

" They don't want to see," she reflected, with an odd sense of triumph. This, in fine, was the key to the problem which had so perplexed her after she had passed from childhood into girlhood. The mere act of pulling blinds down every day for twenty years struck Rosetta as astoundingly deliberate. Her lively imagination evoked the austere figure of Crump carrying out inviolable instructions. The act itself, the blotting out of half one's surroundings, the blinding, so to speak, of one eye, became immeasurably impressive because of its endless repetition. Let it be recorded that Rosetta did not forget the carpets. But she knew that her sisters let the sun work its will upon articles more valuable than carpets upon the garden side of the house. Careful they were, but never pinchers. She remembered also that her nursery had looked upon the street, and that when she was ten years old it had been changed apparently without rhyme or reason.

Were the sisters right or wrong in this sustained endeavour to ignore what offended them? Septimus would answer the question with a curt "Wrong"; but then Septimus was a man with nothing more than a tincture of Mauleverer blood in his veins.

The girl sighed as she moved forward a few paces. Engrossed in thought, she was still gazing at the façade of her home, when she almost stumbled over the body of a man. With a gasp of surprise and horror, she stood still, staring open-mouthed at what she took to be a corpse. For the body lay huddled up. A leg, trousered in fustian, stuck out queerly. The head was thrown back, the mouth was open.

"He has been murdered," she thought, making sure that no human being could assume an attitude so uncontrollable even in sleep. Also the face of the man was purple, and monstrously swollen. Pity swept revulsion from her mind as she bent over him. Perhaps he was not quite dead.

Bending over him, a disgusting odour of spirits assailed her, and she heard him breathe. Then she knew instinctively—for she had never seen a fellow-creature in such a condition—that he was dead drunk.

She reeled back, as if the poisonous fumes of the cheap gin and brandy had intoxicated her. Then she fled across the road and rang the bell, for the front door was always kept locked. When Crump opened the door Rosetta asked, "Am I very late?" and before the astonished Crump could answer, added breathlessly: "There is a drunken man lying under the trees opposite."

"Ugh!" said Crump.

"Oughtn't we to do something, Crump?"

"Well, miss, you've only to say the word, and I'll step across with a bucket of water."

"Oh, Crumpie! Aren't you rather hard?"

"Miss Rosetta, hard I may be, but you'd be just as hard if you'd had any dealings with drunken beasts of men. Whatever was you doing in Hog Lane?"

"I walked home that way for a change!"

"What! With scarlet fever raging like a pestilence at the other end of it?"

"I kept in the middle of the lane."

She ran upstairs to change her frock, excitedly alive to the fact that she was a naughty little girl, and that judgment, scarlet as sin, might overtake her. She had read little fiction, and that of an improving character. "The Daisy Chain," "The Fairchild Family," "Sunday Echoes in Weekday Hours," had succeeded "Leila and Her Island," "Harry and Lucy," and the enchanting "Masterman Ready." The privileged few yet remaining who read these books diligently at a susceptible age will never be able quite to purge their minds of the conviction that virtue is rewarded on this earth and vice punished. Rosetta, examining her lovely complexion, beheld it in fancy discoloured and disfigured by a hideous rash.

"I shall deserve it."

She reached the dining-room just two minutes after the sisters had seated themselves. Rosetta apologised and blurted out the truth.

"I came home through Hog Lane. I didn't know about the scarlet fever. Why didn't you tell me?"

"We never supposed you would pass through those slums. What possessed you?"

"My pet little devil—curiosity."

"You went out of your way to see horrors?"

"Yes; and I saw them. You needn't scold me, because I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself, and I've no doubt I'll be down to-morrow with scarlet fever."

"Rubbish!" said Prudence.

"To-night she can gargle her throat," suggested Jacqueline. "Did you have a pleasant afternoon at the Vicarage?"

"I enjoyed myself when I was talking to Septimus."

"Did you remember to ask Mrs. Lovibond for that recipe?"

"Oh, dear! I forgot all about it. I'm so sorry, sister."

"It's of little consequence," said Prudence coldly.

The meal, which always began with soup and ended with jam, passed pleasantly enough, and whenever the sisters smiled graciously upon her, Rosetta thought, "I have been a little beast, but I will be good—I swear I'll be good."

"I hope you talked to Mrs. Pogany," Prudence said presently.

"Oh, I didn't forget to do that. You know I really enjoy my talks with her now."

The sisters looked gratified, but slightly puzzled. They had agreed together that Mrs. Pogany was "tiresome," but a very admirable wife and mother notwithstanding. Rosetta laughed joyously, and explained, "I enjoy talking with the poor dear, because Septimus taught me his game."

"His game ?"

"Yes, the platitude game. It's the Mosaic Law as applied to small talk—a platitude for a platitude. Such fun ! For instance, poor Mrs. Pogany greeted me to-day with, 'I am afraid, my child, that your dear sisters are feeling the heat.'"

Prudence did not look pleased. People with coarse pores to their skin and a full habit of body did undoubtedly feel the heat, and also—although that could never be mentioned—perspired too profusely. Rosetta continued gaily :

"I replied, 'One doesn't feel the heat, Mrs. Pogany, when one sits in a cool room upon the north side of the house.'"

"That is quite true," murmured Jacqueline.

"Septimus admitted that my reply was just right. What I wanted to say was, 'Thank Heaven, if we Mauleverers feel the heat, we don't show it.'"

Prudence smiled.

"We Mauleverers can't say what we think."

"No, indeed," murmured Jacqueline.

Prudence rose from the table and led the way into the drawing-room, where she played Patience till half-past nine, when she read aloud a chapter of the Bible ; and at a quarter to ten Rosetta retired, with the injunction to gargle her throat thoroughly with an anti eptic solution of boracic acid. As soon as the elder ladies were alone, Prudence said in a low voice, "We must go to Bognor."

"You think——"

"Exactly what you think. One cannot be toc careful at this critical age. You remarked that she talked with him this afternoon and about him during dinner. He's a dangerous young man. But he'll be gone when we return, and in the meantime we might do worse than consult Mauleverer."

"About Rosetta?"

"About Septimus Lovibond. Mauleverer is good-natured and he has influence. He might find a suitable appointment for this young man in some remote part of the world."

"Sister, there are moments when I realise that you have the tact and discretion which would have adorned the most exalted sphere."

Prudence waved a disclaiming hand. Jacqueline added with hesitation: "All the same, he might refuse such an appointment. He is destined, so I have understood, to win a Fellowship and take Orders."

"And yet he talks to Rosetta about the limitations of a Church of England clergyman. He is certainly enterprising. And if——"

"Yes, sister?"

"If this affair is serious, he will jump at any chance to make money."

"And if he should make money?"

"It will be time enough to reconsider our position when he has made it."

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CHAPTER IV

THE LOVIBONDS

UPON the evening of the tennis-party at the Vicarage, the father of Septimus was profoundly disturbed by the receipt of an anonymous letter. More than once he had advised parishioners to burn unread unsigned communications, but then—as Mrs. Lovibond would have said—who expects parsons to practise what they preach?—certainly not their wives! Mr. Lovibond read the letter, and was about to tear it up when he heard his wife's quiet voice saying, "Who is your illiterate correspondent, dear?"

Rather red in the face, he handed the letter to her, saying apologetically, "I was halfway through it before I noticed that it was anonymous. I shall ignore it."

Mrs. Lovibond took the letter and read:

"REVEREND SIR,

"A Frend rites this to tell You what a Father ought to no. Mister Septimus is meeting the Honnerable Miss Rosetter on the sly. Being the Mother of Five and most Respectable I feel You ad ought to no.

"A FREND."

" I shall ignore it," repeated Mr. Lovibond.

" Can we ? "

" What ! You insinuate that our son is capable of taking advantage of a girl of sixteen ? "

" She is seventeen. I am sure that there has been a mild flirtation. I gave Rosetta a tiny hint yesterday."

" How did she take it ? "

" She blushed."

Mrs. Lovibond examined the letter more carefully ; then she said with deliberateness : " This is not the letter of an illiterate person. The bad spelling, the absurd capital letters, and the small handwriting are assumed. It is possible that a friend has taken this means of warning us. Indeed, I believe I know who wrote it."

" Who ? "

" Crump."

" Bless my soul! Crump—the mother of five ! "

" That is Crump's guile. She is a faithful soul, but like the rest of us she loathes the idea of disturbing the sisters. I happen to have a letter of hers which I will fetch at once."

Within five minutes Mr. Lovibond was satisfied that Crump was his anonymous correspondent.

" Then it is true," he said dismally.

" I'm afraid so."

" I shall speak to Septimus to-morrow morning."

" Will you leave that to me ? "

" Certainly not, my dear. It's a man's business, as even Crump perceived."

" You won't betray her ? "

"I'm surprised you should ask such a question. I shall deal lightly with this peccadillo."

"Yes, yes; there can have been nothing more than a mild flirtation, but Septimus is so hot-headed."

"Fortunately I am cool."

"But you mustn't be cold."

"You can leave the matter in my hands with perfect confidence."

Mrs. Lovibond said no more. Next morning, after breakfast, Mr. Lovibond remarked blandly, "A word with you in my study, Septimus."

But the tone of his voice did not deceive the young fellow; and the carriage of his head, as he followed his father into the rather stuffy room which looked upon the High Street, indicated high courage, tempered by disagreeable memories of previous interviews in the same place. The relations, in fine, between father and son had not been of the happiest; and unquestionably Mrs. Lovibond would have been the right person to deal with the delicate situation.

"Sit down, Septimus," said his father.

Septimus obeyed, exasperated because on these occasions his father remained standing, a fine figure of a parson, who, in the pulpit and out of it, aroused an expectation which was never satisfied quite adequately. He began stiffly—

"Your mother and I have reason to believe that you are, let us say, philandering with Rosetta Mauleverer."

Septimus maintained an obstinate silence, which he had found extraordinarily effective. Mr. Lovibond waited an instant before he continued. This silence always irritated him. He was in the habit of tendering advice to his son (and to others), but he was invariably at a loss to determine how Septimus took it. Did he take it at all? Did it sink in?

"That sort of thing, my dear fellow, must stop. It's not fair to the young lady, it's not fair to us, and it's likely to jeopardise your future."

Again he paused expectantly, but Septimus made no reply. He thought to himself, "Does this good father of mine really think that I ought to give Rosetta away?"

"You will admit, I take it," continued Mr. Lovibond, "that with my experience of life I am better qualified than you to form an opinion of what is best for you?"

"I don't know that," replied Septimus respectfully. "I am twenty-two, sir, and I submit that I know what I want better than you."

"True. It may not have occurred to you, Septimus, that I know what you are likely to want at thirty, because I have been thirty; and what I wanted at thirty was substantially different from what I wanted at two-and-twenty."

He smiled graciously, conscious that he had scored. But he frowned as he went on in a less pleasant tone—

"What you have been doing is not cricket."

This expression was ill-chosen. The parson had shone in the cricket-field, and it annoyed him that Septimus displayed no aptitude for the national game. More than once the boy had dared to speak contemptuously of cricket—a really unpardonable offence. Septimus answered quickly—

"How do you know, sir, what I've been doing?"

"Your dear mother and I have eyes and ears. I have no wish to force your confidence, and I make no doubt that the affair is merely in the cooing, not the billing stage. You pride yourself, perhaps unduly, upon the possession of brains. Now, as between man and man, is it right, is it manly—is it, I repeat, *cricket*, to compromise a young lady of seventeen who, being penniless herself, will most assuredly not be permitted to marry a penniless young man?"

"Why do you say—compromise?"

"You have met Rosetta on the sly?"

The unhappy Septimus blushed. He did not know—and how could he guess?—that his father had received an anonymous letter. Stunned by surprise and humiliation, he forgot the dignity of a Trinity scholar, and blurted out, like a boy, "You have had us watched!"

"Tut, tut!" exclaimed the parson. He saw that he could afford to be magnanimous. "My dear fellow, let us be calm. It was inevitable in such a town as this that you should be caught, and as inevitable that it would come to my notice. I am proud to believe that my son is a gentleman. and I have only this to add—Stop it!"

"I have met her," said Septimus slowly.

"Just so. Under the rose—under the rose."

He smiled indulgently, recalling a somewhat similar adventure of his own youth. Septimus replied violently, "Under an elm-tree blasted by lightning."

"My dear boy!"

"The meeting on the sly is over," continued Septimus, now shouting at his father; "but I love her. Do you hear?"

"I do. Everybody in the High Street can hear also."

"I love her, and I mean to have her some day."

"That, I fear, is quite impossible."

"We'll see. Meanwhile, have no fears. I shall play cricket according to its ridiculous rules. I despise its rules, but I am aware that in the present rotten condition of society they cannot be ignored. I'd break 'em cheerfully myself, but I shall not ask Rosetta to break 'em."

"You speak very intemperately. I can make, I trust, allowance; but do you—I put the question in good faith—do you venture to indict the accumulated wisdom of centuries which has gone to the making of these conventions you despise?"

Septimus was now boiling over.

"Accumulated wisdom! Coagulated rot, I say." Then, as he perceived the derisive smile upon his father's face, he pulled himself together with a tremendous effort, continuing coldly, "I'll not inflict my opinions on you, sir."

"I am obliged," said Mr. Lovibond drily. "I trust to your honour and to your knowledge of rules which you despise for the moment merely because you lack the experience to judge how wisely they have been formulated."

Septimus went out; the door banged behind him.

"A fiery spark," muttered the parson.

On the Monday Septimus learned from his mother that the Misses Mauleverer were about to leave Charminster for Bognor. From the kind tone in which this communication was made, the son divined that his mother was inviting confidence. But Septimus was too proud and too sore to respond. He answered sulkily, " I shall be gone when they come back. I'll drop in this afternoon to say good-bye."

She touched his arm caressingly and tried to woo confidence with tender eyes.

" My son, I am *so* sorry."

" Are you ? That's it. You are sorry that I'm miserable, because you're a darling, but you can't sympathise with my point of view."

" You have never stated it, dear."

" You shall have it now, hot and hot. I'm an anarchist."

" Gracious ! "

" Wait ! I don't want to throw bombs, except at the person who spied on Rosetta and me. I'm an anarchist in the sense that I consider myself too civilised to be bound by rules which were drawn up originally for semi-savages. I propose to do what I know to be the right thing regardless of conventions framed for people who did not know the right thing. The right thing for Rosetta and me is to marry—and the sooner the better. If that were reasonably admitted by you and the sisters, I could apply myself to earning enough to support us. I've not the smallest doubt of my ability to do so, and the fact that my love for Rosetta was acknowledged and respected would spur me to the highest achievement. Now I shall start crippled, torn in two by torturing doubts. Rosetta won't see me, and she won't be allowed to write to me. And, according to the rules of what the pater calls 'cricket,' I must not attempt to see her, except ceremoniously—Miss Mauleverer's word that!—and I cannot write to her. During the years when I'm struggling desperately to earn her, she will be at the mercy of everybody whose will is stronger than hers. The sweet thing has not a strong will. You know that. I accept it as a fact and without regret. My will is strong enough for two. Now, then, what is going to happen? She will be bored to tears in Charminster——"

"Dear Septimus!"

"Dull, dirty, stupid town, full of dull, stupid people! How you can stand it——"

She smiled.

"I take it sitting."

"You are a saint. Rosetta is not a saint, and she belongs to my generation, which is so different from yours. And the sisters are going to do the one thing which will reveal to Rosetta what this place really is. She is to be presented by Lady Mauleverer and given a season in town. And afterwards she will return here to eat her heart out. Mother, isn't there something rotten in the conventions which tear asunder Rosetta and me?"

She kissed him, unable to answer. He saw that her face was white and drawn, and he felt her hands clutching him.

"I am tied hand and foot," he exclaimed chokingly; "and so is she."

"You must leave her free, Septimus," she whispered.

"I shall do so against my better judgment, because it is the game. If I did the right thing I should make her swear to be true—to stick to me though the heavens fell."

"You can't do that, my son."

"It maddens me that I can't."

"If it is best for you that you should marry Rosetta, you will do so."

"There again! We can't discuss these things. I hold that we make our own fates, and you believe devoutly that they are made for us."

With that he kissed her and left the room.

In the afternoon he attired himself in a blue-serge suit, not of the smartest, and surveyed his image in the glass, smiling ironically as he remarked that his hair needed cutting and that both collar and tie were of a Bohemian fashion affected by the choicer intellectual spirits of Trinity. He was thinking, "Those la-di-da fools will be after her." Then he placed upon his fine head a soft felt hat instead of the conventional straw, headgear condemned by the parson as foreign and therefore indicative of eccentricity, if not worse. Mr. Lovibond was of opinion, and with reason, that a Trinity scholar should be proud of sporting the colours of his College.

Thus arrayed, Septimus walked to the Dower House, passing *en route* through Hog Lane, purposely avoiding the elm blasted by lightning. As he walked he smoked fiercely a briar pipe, although well aware that the sisters detested the smell of tobacco-smoke.

Crump informed him, with slight acidity, that the ladies were at home, but she added significantly, "They're engaged, Master Septimus." The "Master" was a clever touch, which provoked a frown.

"I have called to say good-bye, Crump. Kindly inform the ladies that I am here."

He entered the prim drawing-room and took up a commanding position on the hearth-rug. His eyes rested upon Jacqueline's tambour-frame, and the very upright chair habitually used by Prudence. He remarked that the photographs of the Queen and the Heir-apparent were missing; and he knew that these emblems of loyalty would be taken to Bognor, there to shine conspicuous in some shabby sitting-room with a bow-window overlooking the sea. Upon another chair he perceived a book, "Quentin Durward," bound in mellow calf, a volume of the Abbotsford Edition. At sight of this a rare smile softened his face; and he beamed with delight when he discovered a small cambric handkerchief evidently placed between the pages to mark the last passage read. He examined the handkerchief, which smelt of lavender. In the corner of it was a cypher "R" and "M" intertwined.

"Jupiter Ammon!" he muttered.

With a furtive glance and head half turned to the door, he hesitated. Silence reigned. Septimus kissed the handkerchief and stuffed it hastily into his breast-pocket as his ear caught an approaching footstep.

Prudence came in.

She saluted him with charming politeness, meet-

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ing the man with kindly eyes which reflected memories of the boy.

"My sisters will be down directly. We are packing. To-morrow we leave for Bognor. We were fortunate in securing the same apartments we had last year."

"I know. I called in to say good-bye."

They sat down. Prudence continued in a tone of detached friendliness: "Your father tells me that you are working very hard. It seems difficult to believe that I may soon have the pleasure of congratulating a Bachelor of Arts. I suppose you will take Orders?"

"No," said Septimus curtly.

"Indeed?"

"I have changed my plans."

"Really. Is it indiscreet to ask for details? I thought your father had set his heart upon a Fellowship and a College living."

"That means waiting too long, Miss Mauleverer. I am not cut out for a parson or a schoolmaster. I have thought of journalism."

"Journalism? Isn't that rather a step backward?"

"Journalism as a means to a definite end. All things are possible to a journalist nowadays. But for that matter I'm ready to take anything good that turns up."

Prudence smiled gently. She could read this young fellow easily, and the writing upon his ingenuous heart moved her to pity without tempering her decision to write to Mauleverer. She had, indeed, rehearsed the little scene. She had said to herself, "If there is anything between Rosetta and this young man, who is far too clever to be ignored, he will be searching for a shorter cut to fortune than that pleasant path which meanders along the Cam."

"Here is Rosetta," she said, with odd abruptness, for she detected a sparkle in masterful eyes. Septimus had identified the beloved step before it was heard by a sister.

The pair blushed as they shook hands—ceremoniously!

"Septimus will drink a cup of tea with us?" said Prudence.

Rosetta picked up "Quentin Durward" as Miss Mauleverer turned her back upon the lovers to ring the bell. The girl glanced at Septimus, who indicated by a gesture that the missing handkerchief was snug against a faithful heart. Rosetta's eyes were dancing as Jacqueline entered the room.

Septimus drank three cups of tea and stayed as long as he dared, reflecting that the sisters were amazingly nice to him—perfect darlings, with the most charming manners in the world. He could not know, of course, that the ladies were indeed more than usually nice because they had decided that he must be despatched to Jericho or Timbuctoo.

Presently Jacqueline went upstairs—a hint to Septimus that he might outstay his welcome. Prudence placed her cool fingers in his hand and said, effusively for her, "Dear Septimus, I wish you well."

To this he replied awkwardly, "Thanks."

With easy dignity she turned to ring the bell. Rosetta felt the grip of a feverish hand, and instantly she offered her sweet lips. It was audacious, almost sublime. Septimus silently pressed his lips to hers and said cheerfully, "Good-bye, Rosetta."

"Good-bye, Septimus," she answered demurely.

CHAPTER V

THE PARBURY SYSTEM

PRUDENCE wrote from Bognor to the Head of the Family, and by the luck of things the letter reached him when he happened to be stopping in Scotland with Sir Jaspar Parbury, who had made a large fortune in the Malay Peninsula. Mauleverer read the letter, chuckled, and handed it to his wife.

"Gad!" he said. "Prudence is well named. Read that, my dear Mary."

"MY DEAR MAULEVERER,

"I am counting upon your kindness to do me a favour. You have met young Septimus Lovibond, the son of the Vicar of Charminster, to whom you presented the living. He is a clever young man, a Scholar of Trinity, and destined by his father either to take Holy Orders or become a Tutor at Cambridge. From my knowledge of Septimus he is unfit for these vocations. He would do better, I feel assured, in commerce, and it has struck me that with your influence you might find him some position abroad, possibly in India. To be quite frank with you, there has been, I fear, a very mild flirtation between him and dear Rosetta. She likes him because, unhappily, there are no other young men in Charminster who can compare with him in looks or cleverness. The affair is not serious, but it might become so. If you can accomplish this you will be doing a service to the young fellow, who is very ambitious, and to

"Your affectionate cousin,
"PRUDENCE MAULEVERER."

Mary laughed, as she returned the letter to her husband.

"Rather an odd coincidence that we should be here when this arrives."

"A coincidence?"

"Sir Jaspar could find young Lovibond a billet, I make no doubt."

"Of course. We are shooting grouse together this morning. After luncheon, if he's in the right mood, I'll broach the subject. Prudence is quite right. Rosetta's chances mustn't be imperilled."

The day happened to be fine, the birds were plentiful, and Sir Jaspar shot well. After luncheon, when the pipes were lit, Mauleverer said to his host, "Are you on the look-out, my dear Parbury, for a smart young man?"

"I am always on the look-out for smart young men. Why?"

"A distant kinsman of mine, a sturdy, upstanding boy, strong and clever, in fact a Scholar of Trinity, wants a billet abroad."

"Does he? And you think that my system would suit him?"

"Your system?"

"The Parbury system. I select my young

men very carefully. I pay them three hundred a year, rising automatically to eight, and I scrap 'em relentlessly at the end of ten years."

"Why do you scrap 'em?"

Sir Jaspar smiled grimly.

"The climate of the Malay Peninsula is—peculiar. At the end of ten years I'd saved enough to buy a half-interest in a trading schooner. I look after my young men. I lodge and feed them well, and they can save three or four thousand pounds in ten years."

"I see."

"If this boy of yours is what you say, I'll take him. I go to London in a fortnight, and he can come to my office. I do my own examining, and some good people say that I'm harder to please than the Indian Civil Commissioners."

"I am awfully obliged to you."

"Not at all."

That night the Head of the Family wrote to Prudence and also to the Vicar of Charminster, to whom he mentioned the salary, rising automatically to eight hundred a year. In a postscript to the Vicar's letter, he added: "I seized an opportunity of doing a good turn to a promising boy, who is also a kinsman."

"A good turn!"

Mr. Lovibond protruded a dubious lower lip at the phrase. He wanted Septimus to wear his own easy slippers, and he had set, perhaps, an inordinate value upon a fellowship and what it included. When he showed the letter to his wife, after considering seriously the expediency of declining the offer and saying nothing about it to anybody, she took his point of view, exclaiming with agitation—

"I wonder if the sisters are at the back of this?"

"I don't think so. Lord Mauleverer is very kind. Septimus is only distantly of kin to him, but evidently it counts."

"If the sisters have plotted to send my boy to an unhealthy climate——!"

"Yes?"

"I should be furious," replied the mother.

"They may have received an anonymous letter also."

"No. I taxed Crump. She confessed tearfully that she couldn't bring herself to tell the ladies, so she wrote to you."

"Well," continued the Vicar, who liked to despatch unpleasant business as quickly as possible, "as you think as I do, my dear, I shall write at once declining this offer."

"Thomas—we must submit it to Septimus."

"I don't see the necessity."

"But I do."

The Vicar moved uneasily in his comfortable chair. Interviews with his masterful son were rather trying.

"He is nearly twenty-three, remember," said Mrs. Lovibond. "And if he met Mauleverer, and found out that we had concealed things from him, he would have a right to be angry."

"True. I'll speak to him at once and get it over."

"Perhaps I had better do that."

"As you please, my dear."

Accordingly, the mother went in search of her son. She found him on the lawn, reading the "Lysistrata" of Aristophanes, and reflecting that women in the days of Pericles were quite as bent upon having the last word as now. A smile shone upon his strong face as she approached, and he said cheerfully—

"Come to have a little talk?"

"Yes."

"Good!" He rose and stretched himself. "I am bored with these old stiffs. There is nothing of the true scholar in me—nothing at all. I've plugged away, because I wanted to get on, but honestly I'm rather fed up. How grave you look!"

"We have received a letter from Lord Mauleverer."

"Oh!" He yawned.

"Here it is."

He read it through, hardly grasping its meaning. Then he gave a wild yell, and kicked his Aristophanes half across the lawn, exclaiming—

"I knew my chance would come. I tell you I knew it. This is simply glorious—glorious!"

"It means——"

"It means Rosetta. That's what it means."

"It means exile, my son."

"I'm going to dance you round the lawn." He seized her by the waist, and then he saw tears in her eyes.

"Aren't you delighted?"

"Delighted at the prospect of losing my only child."

He regarded her gravely.

"You couldn't keep me here, you know. This billet is exactly what I want. I've been miserable because I didn't cram for the Indian Civil. I could have got that easily if I'd worked for it from the beginning. But this is better."

Mrs. Lovibond sighed. She was too clever not to see that the affair was settled. Sir Jaspar might find Septimus ineligible, but a mother's pride dismissed this hope as too attenuated to be entertained.

"Your father will be so disappointed," she murmured.

"I'll deal lightly with him; but this concerns my life rather than his. You must let me answer Lord Mauleverer."

"The climate is so bad."

"I'm as strong as they make 'em. And I shall take jolly good care of myself, because the two best women in the world are fond of me."

She winced at that; and he kissed her tenderly.

"I knew things would come right. I knew I should have to earn Rosetta."

"Do nothing rashly, Septimus. You had better talk this over with your father. I left him in his study quite unable to give his mind to his sermon."

"Right! I'll tackle him now."

He strode off, and she heard him whistling gaily as he entered the house. Very sadly, she picked up the despised Aristophanes and a notebook filled with idioms and unfamiliar words. Idly she turned over the pages of Aristophanes, glancing at the marginal comments in pencil. The author was copiously collated. Against a passage dealing with a dubious reading, Mrs. Lovibond read in her son's handwriting: "What a waste of time! Nobody knows the true reading, and nobody cares! Rot!" Upon other pages he had scribbled similar protests, the healthy scorn of youth and life for what is old and dead.

"I shall lose him," she reflected.

As may be guessed, the strong will of the son triumphed easily over the obstinacy of the father. Mr. Lovibond made some inquiries, discovering with a satisfaction which mitigated disappointment that his son was regarded by others as extraordinarily lucky. Sir Jaspar did pick and choose his young men with care and judgment. A very high compliment indeed would be paid to Septimus if he were accepted by the great man.

In due time he went up to London for the portentous interview. Sir Jaspar asked many questions, and never removed his cold grey eyes from the young man's face. At the end of the interview he said curtly—

"Could you go at once?"

"If necessary, sir."

"You are two years older than the usual standard. Why waste any more time? Honours don't count much over there."

"They don't count much over here."

"The sooner you're off the better. My general manager will instruct you about kit and so forth. I have only one word of advice to you—Keep fit."

"*Fuge Venere, et Baccho, et tobacco,*" quoted Septimus.

"Exactly. I know enough dog-Latin to construe that. The climate never disagreed with me, my boy, because I never gave it a chance."

He shook hands with Septimus at parting.

"I think you'll do," he said.

From the chief, Septimus went to the manager, who said next day—

"You're in luck's way. Sir Jaspar is pleased with you."

This meant more than Septimus grasped at the time. Sir Jaspar was hard to please. The expression: "Sir Jaspar is displeased" adumbrated "scrapping." The manager explained this unmistakably.

"The Parbury system makes no exceptions. It wants the best, and pays for the best." He cited half a dozen names of successful men. "They started with us."

"And the others?"

"Most of 'em—dead!"

"Dead?"

"Dead, or worse than dead."

Septimus returned to Charminster ablaze with enthusiasm to announce that he was sailing within a month. His father begged him to take his degree, and wrote at length to the Master of Trinity, entreating Authority to use influence with headstrong and excited Youth. To Mr. Lovibond's surprise, the famous scholar replied thus: "I cannot do what you ask, because your son, in my opinion, is right in abandoning an academic career. I have guessed for some time past that he was growing impatient of such restraints as must be imposed here. If he were my own son—and I should be proud of such a son—I should say the same. Let him follow his own path."

To this the Vicar bowed his head.

But, after the excitement had diminished, Septimus exhibited signs of uneasiness, which at last found expression.

"I must see Rosetta," he declared to his mother. "I shall nip down to Bognor to say——" he paused, blushing.

"What?"

"In five years I shall have saved enough to justify me in marrying the darling."

"You propose to tell her that?"

"I do."

"And ask a blessing of the sisters?"

"I am not so sanguine. It will be between Rosetta and me."

"A secret engagement?"

"Have you any objections?"

"Many. You will impose upon an honest girl the necessity of deceiving the women who have devoted their lives to her. If you boldly face the ladies, matters will be worse. Unconscious pressure will be put on Rosetta; she will be made very unhappy. Leave her in peace. Write to her such a letter as she can show to her sisters, and trust her."

"I suppose you are right," he groaned.

"I know that I am right."

"There is the moral obligation."

"Far more binding than the other, believe me."

Next day he wrote to her:

"DEAR ROSETTA,

"I have astonishing news for you and the sisters. Sir Jaspar Parbury has offered me a clerkship at Singapore. I begin with a screw of 300*l.* a year, rising automatically to eight. I shall be boarded and lodged at Sir Jaspar's expense, so I ought to be able to put by two-thirds at least of my salary. Lord Mauleverer worked the thing, and I am eternally obliged to him. I sail by the next boat, and am very busy collecting my kit.

" Please tell your sisters that I shall never forget the delightful hours I have spent at the Dower House.

" Yours ever,
" SEPTIMUS."

Rosetta showed this letter to the sisters, who smiled at each other discreetly. Rosetta did not smile, for she was thinking of king cobras and wild beasts and wild men, not to mention monsoons and a tropical climate. And yet joy flooded her soul, because a gallant youth was braving all perils for her sake.

" You must write a suitable letter in reply," she heard Prudence saying in measured accents, " and please assure Septimus of our interest in his welfare and our warm wishes that he will do well."

" Yes," murmured Rosetta.

Prudence glanced at her face, as she continued lightly : " We shall hear of Septimus through his dear mother. Jacqueline feels with me that there should be no further correspondence between this young man and you."

" Quite," said Jacqueline nervously.

" You will promise us that, child ? "

" If you insist. It seems rather unnecessary, rather ridiculous."

" You must trust our knowledge of what is *convenable*."

" Yes, my love," added Jacqueline.

"His letter to you," said Prudence markedly, "is distinguished by very good taste."

Rosetta gave a nervous laugh, which puzzled and distressed the ladies. Immediately, they began to talk of the season in town and the many pleasures and distractions to come, prattling on with renewed confidence as they beheld a sparkle in Rosetta's lovely eyes. And all the time the girl was thinking: "Would they be glad, if anything happened to him; if he did not come back?"

She answered his letter that same afternoon, when the sisters were taking their nap.

"DEAR SEPTIMUS,

"This is wonderful news. I am quite sure that you will make a fortune and return to Charminster a nabob. Be sure that we shan't forget you. *Please be careful of snakes!* We shall hear all about you and you will hear about us through your mother. I hope you have not forgotten to buy a cholera belt. My sisters send their warm wishes for your welfare.

"Yours ever,
"ROSETTA MAULEVERER."

Prudence made one comment, when she read this letter.

"You ought to sign yourself, my dear, 'yours sincerely,' or 'very sincerely yours,' but it doesn't matter. The letter is nicely written and expressed. Jacqueline and I propose to send a little gift—a pair of binoculars would, I think, be suitable."

Thus they salved conscience. Rosetta, however, added some postscripts.

" P.S.—I have promised not to write to you.

" P.P.S.—Bognor is full of dull people, and my heart is in Charminster."

Having inscribed these extra lines, Rosetta cut from her head a long tress of hair, which she wrapped in silver paper and enclosed in the envelope. Then she sealed it.

Two days later Septimus received a handsome pair of binoculars from the Misses Mauleverer. He examined them with an odd smile upon his face, saying to his mother: " How good of them! But, I say, wouldn't I like to send them in return another pair, which would make the dears see through the walls which surround them? "

Mrs. Lovibond laughed. " Perhaps, Septimus, it is as well for Rosetta and you that their vision is not quite so keen as it might be."

At the end of the month he sailed for Singapore.

CHAPTER VI

ROSETTA HAS A GORGEOUS TIME

ROSETTA went to Mauleverer House in the following May, and the sisters and Crump accompanied her. Previous to this there had been two visits to London, when Rosetta was placed in the hands of Madame Prune of Dover Street, who expressed herself as ravished with the pleasure of making frocks for so beautiful and charming a *débutante.* The sisters helped to array Rosetta in her Court gown, and when she stood before them in all the glory of train and feathers, Prudence opened a shabby shagreen case and took from it a single string of finely matched pearls which had shone softly upon the necks of her mother and grandmother. She fastened the string round Rosetta's white neck with trembling fingers.

"Oh, Prudence, are you lending me your pearls?"

"No, child; I am giving them to you."

Rosetta kissed her, while Jacqueline looked on with a smile upon her delicate lips and tears in her soft blue eyes. Rosetta was blushing as she murmured her thanks, for she thought: "If Prudence knew, would she give me this?"

Then Mary Mauleverer came in, followed by her daughter, Syringa, another *débutante,* but not so lovely as Rosetta. The Head of the Family had three daughters and no sons. Mary, who was American on the distaff side, had been an heiress, whose money enabled her lord to live at the Court in a manner befitting his rank. This was a source of profound satisfaction to the ladies, but they cherished in their hearts a mild grievance against Mary, because she had not provided an heir.

Mauleverer, good genial soul, was of opinion that Rosetta would create a sensation.

"She's a beauty," he said to Mary.

Mary replied ruefully: "She will eclipse poor Syringa."

The father laughed. "So much the better! I'm in no hurry to lose my dear little girl."

At the drawing-room, his prediction came true; and afterwards, when an informal reception was held at Mauleverer House, many kinsmen, whom Rosetta had never met, overwhelmed her with pretty speeches and compliments. The ladies returned to Charminster next day, and the Head of the Family accompanied them to Waterloo.

"We shan't keep Rosetta long," he said with his jolly laugh. "And, look here, the *trousseau* will be my affair."

"We couldn't permit such generosity, my dear Mauleverer."

"Pish and tut! I insist upon that privilege."

For Rosetta a gorgeous time followed. She became very popular, because she was intelligent enough to appeal to the clever men, and too kind-hearted to snub the duffers. Almost immediately a rising Under Secretary fell a victim to her charms. He made love assiduously without much encouragement from the young lady. When he proposed for the first time she exclaimed distressfully, " I like you so much, but not better than several others."

He announced his intention of trying again.

Meantime, letters had come from Singapore to Mrs. Lovibond. Septimus wrote enthusiastically of the Parbury system. He liked his work and his fellow-clerks.

" Like Mr. Mantalini," he said, " I'm a dem'd moist unpleasant body, but the heat has warmed me to supreme endeavour."

The Under Secretary proposed again and again with no better fortune than before. Inasmuch as he was charming as well as handsome, Mary Mauleverer came to the conclusion that there might be somebody else; and when she mentioned this to her husband, he laughed and said emphatically, " There is."

" Who ? "

" Cæsar."

" Impossible."

" Cæsar " was Mauleverer's nickname for a famous pro-consul, Sir Rodney Brough, whose dealings with the Basutos are well known to students of South African history. The great man was spending a few months in England, and, although reckoned by match-making mammas to be a misogynist, it was certain that in his quiet, grim fashion he had paid attention to Rosetta.

" She's not a bit afraid of him," said Mauleverer.

" But he's over forty, and I don't like him."

" It's worrying me," said the Head of the Family.

Indeed it worried him more than he cared to admit. Cæsar was a conqueror, and conquerors appealed to women of all ages. That afternoon at his club he encountered a Bishop, and asked him, "Can you tell me how old Cæsar was when he had that affair with Cleopatra?"

The Bishop was mildly amused.

"I'm rather rusty with my Roman history. Let me see. He was fifty at least when he crossed the Rubicon."

"Familiar expression that, but I never knew exactly what it meant till now. Cleopatra, of course, was the Rubicon."

The Bishop gravely explained that the Rubicon was a river. Mauleverer listened, with thoughts elsewhere. He said with irrelevance: "Rum thing, very, men of that age falling in love with bread-and-butter misses!"

"I should hardly describe Cleopatra as that, my dear fellow."

"I wasn't thinking of Cleopatra. When December marries May there is generally trouble sooner or later."

"Um," said the Bishop, dubiously. Afterwards, Mauleverer remembered with dismay that the Bishop had married for the second time a young lady some five-and-twenty years his junior.

At Ascot Sir Rodney sat beside Rosetta in the enclosure and listened with marked deference to her prattle. Society whispered and giggled, and mild jokes were perpetrated about lions and lambs. Upon the following Sunday the great man lunched at Mauleverer House, and, after luncheon, instead of joining the ladies in the drawing-room proposed gruffly a chat with his host in the smoking-room. Mauleverer gave him a large cigar and lit one himself. He was certainly the more nervous of the two.

"Your cousin is very attractive," began Sir Rodney, in the deep voice which terrified the Basutos and others.

"Very."

"I am going to put a plain question, Mauleverer, and I want a plain answer. At my age I can't afford to make a ridiculous blunder. The young lady appears to like me. She seems to be very interested in my life. She asks questions.

"What sort of questions?"

"About my earlier career—how I started, my difficulties, and so forth. I confess that when in return I question her, it is not easy to elicit replies. So far, my talks with her have been mainly autobiographical. Now, as between man and man, how do you reckon my chance?"

Mauleverer was much impressed. Cæsar was not so terrifying after all, and well-informed men predicted that he might end up Viceroy of India. It was exciting to think of little Rosetta as "Her Excellency." At the same time, he was sensible of an odd repulsion to the conqueror, a feeling he could not analyse or defend. There was nothing against Cæsar. He was said to be hard in his dealing with the natives, an inexorable judge, but still——!

"Haven't you given her a hint?"

"She's elusive; hints are not much in my line. I've generally asked bluntly for what I wanted."

"And you have always got it?"

"Not always."

"Ask her, Brough."

"I was thinking that you might be kind enough to—to sound her first."

"Oh, Lord!" Then he brightened. "My wife might do that."

"Exactly."

"I'll ask her."

"I shall be under the greatest obligations to both of you."

They finished their cigars without further reference to Rosetta, and Sir Rodney took his leave, refusing curtly to join the ladies. Mauleverer found Rosetta and Syringa in the drawing-room.

"Where is Cæsar?" asked Syringa.

Mauleverer laughed and pinched her cheek, but he looked at Rosetta.

"I expect," he said slily, "that there are moments when conquerors can't bear the sight of women."

"Father, what do you mean?"

"Being conquerors, they dread being conquered. Where is your mother?"

"In her own room."

Mauleverer lost no time in telling Mary what had passed between Sir Rodney and himself. Mary listened frowning.

"I would rather have nothing to do with it."

"So would I, for that matter, but it would be a great match."

"Oh, yes; graced by royalty and sanctified by an archbishop, but I don't like him. He's so grim."

"He doesn't look grim when he's talking to and of Rosetta. Now, look here, Mary, I funk tackling her. You remember that chestnut which carried me so well last season. He's yours if you'll sound the child."

"I'll do it," said Mary. She added hopefully: "I'm sure she can't care for him. He has challenged her interest, that's all, and his attentions have flattered her."

That night there was a ball at the Duchess of Worcester's; and next morning at ten Mary entered Rosetta's bedroom. The young lady was still in bed, but wide awake and blissfully conscious of perfect health and an increasing capacity for enjoyment. She was thinking humorously of the triumphs of the previous evening, for she had attracted the attention of a Prince of the Blood, an incident which had made a profound impression upon certain dowagers who, hitherto, had ignored her existence. Also she was telling herself that this was the time of her life, and that she must make the most of it before returning to Charminster. She had made up her mind to become the wife of a struggling man, and it behoved her to fit herself for the future. After the excitements of this wonderful season, she would learn to cook properly and make her own frocks. The secrets of economical house-management ought to be mastered. Also it would be her duty and her pleasure to devote herself cheerfully to the kind sisters whose self-sacrifice and self-denial exacted acknowledgment.

Mary kissed her and sat down by the pretty bed, so virginal with its white muslin hangings and blue ribands.

"Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

"Immensely," said Rosetta. "Oh, how good you have been to me, how kind!"

"It's not very difficult to be kind to you. I noticed that our Under Secretary is recovering from his attack. He didn't come near you at the Duchess's."

Rosetta laughed gaily.

"Oh yes, he did. He proposed again last night, and I had to be rather short with him. His proposals have become chronic. So stupid of him!"

"My dear, he is so exactly right. He adores you, and he will be a Cabinet Minister some day. I can't imagine why he has not captured you. Have you seen anybody else you like better?"

"I like Mauleverer much better."

"You goose! you know what I mean." She went on seriously: "I am aware that a very great man indeed has been paying you attention."

"Who?"

"My dear, don't pretend with me."

"Honestly, Mary, I don't know what you mean."

"I mean Sir Rodney Brough."

Rosetta's face of astonishment was quite sufficient. Mary sighed with relief as Rosetta said excitedly, "That patriarch!"

"He is not more than forty-five, and stronger than men half his years."

"Good gracious!"

"But, my dear child, why have you encouraged him to talk to you?"

Rosetta pouted. "I wanted to know things, Mary. I was fascinated by his adventures. He began with nothing, except his good brains and strong body. He has overcome all sorts of difficulties. I loved hearing him talk about himself. But I swear to you I never suspected that he could be interested in me. I don't believe he is, in the way you mean."

"You can take my word for that."

"Oh, dear! What shall I do?"

"Don't worry! A hint from me will suffice."

"As if I should dream of marrying a man old enough to be my father."

"Such marriages do take place, Rosetta, and some of them turn out happily. I suppose you have dreamed of marrying somebody some day?"

Rosetta blushed as she murmured uneasily: "I suppose every girl does dream of somebody occasionally."

Mary hesitated before she continued, sensible that Rosetta seemed to be amazingly innocent and ignorant. Was it possible that she had not apprehended the meaning of this London season?

"You know, dear, that we shall not be in London next year. We are going round the world and taking Syringa. This is your great chance of making a suitable marriage. I hate to speak of it, and I loathe match-making, but—well—there it is!"

With a gesture, Mary finished her sentence.

"Do you mean," said Rosetta after a pause, "that my sisters counted on that? Did they sell the Cooper miniature for that?"

"I suppose I must reply—yes."

"How disappointed they will be!"

"Don't misunderstand me. Your sisters are good women. They would not wish you to marry to please them, but whatever fools may say to the contrary, it is the destiny of girls like you to marry, and your sisters felt that no sacrifice on their part would be too great if—if you made the right sort of marriage."

"I see."

" Nine times out of ten a girl does fall in love with the first really nice young man who falls in love with her. That is why Mauleverer and I made almost certain that you would take our Under Secretary. With all my heart I wish he had been attracted by Syringa."

Rosetta was aware of hot, betraying blushes, but she dared not turn her head from the kind, keen eyes that looked so steadily into hers.

" I am forced to the conclusion," said Mary slowly, " that you have found already somebody else. And as I am your friend, I advise you to make a clean breast of it. I promise to help you if I can."

Rosetta raised herself up in bed. Then she grasped Mary's hand and held it tight as she said firmly and clearly—

" Mary, I love Septimus Lovibond with all my heart and soul and strength."

CHAPTER VII

A CLOUD UPON THE HORIZON

MARY rose abruptly and went to the window looking out into Portman Square, whose large respectable mansions spoke so eloquently of property. She knew what her own money had accomplished, and she wondered whether Rosetta's love was strong enough to confront poverty and exile. She knew also that she must speak plainly, and she had discovered long ago that it is dangerous to offer advice, because so often it is taken. Let it be remembered, also, that she was half American, and had spent impressionable years in a country where young men and women do marry in the teeth of poverty, and where such marriages are justified by their results.

She came back to the bed to find Rosetta with her face to the wall.

" Is that why you lured on Sir Rodney to talk of his early struggles ? "

" Yes."

" Tell me everything, my dear."

The simple story was told without interruption by the listener. The recital moved Mary profoundly, although she had the barest acquaintance with Septimus. She recalled his eyes, and a strong chin, and his voice with a vibrant and virile quality.

"I must ask some disagreeable questions."

"Ask anything you like."

"Have you tried to realise what life is on a small income?"

"We have always been poor."

"In a sense; but there has been sufficient. If Septimus lost his position—through ill health, let us say?"

"He has splendid health, and so have I."

"Suppose he lost his health and his income, where would you be then?"

"I run that risk, of course."

"You are willing to run it?"

"Yes."

"As the wife of a poor man, you will be rather dull."

"Not with Septimus. I don't think he knows how much I love him."

"If children come, you may have to send them home, or bring them home. That would mean separation."

"You talk as if we were going to be poor for ever and ever. Septimus is sure to make a fortune."

Her optimism dismayed the woman of the world, but she felt impotent to attack it.

"At any rate you will have to wait a long time."

"I shall wait."

Something told Mary that this was true love not to be diverted by arguments, however sound in themselves. She shrugged her shoulders.

"You won't tell anybody?" asked Rosetta.

"I must tell Mauleverer."

They talked for nearly an hour. At the end of that time Mary knew Rosetta almost as intimately as it is possible for one woman to know another. Her sympathy flowed the more abundantly as she realised the nature of Rosetta's relations with the Sisters, and what the girl had suffered in keeping this attachment secret from them.

"I feel," concluded Rosetta, "that I've enjoyed this splendid time under false pretences—that I should not have had it if they suspected the truth; and, I suppose, that is why I've loved my stolen sweets!"

"You have another month," said Mary. "Well, my dear, I shall get rid of your elderly lover, and I pray that your Septimus may turn out as great a conqueror. All the same, I wish you had been heart-free when you came here."

The Head of the Family used unparliamentary language when his wife reported in full.

"I've earned the chestnut," she said.

"D——n that boy! I believe you are on his side, Mary."

"Paul and Virginia used to appeal enormously to me."

"If I remember rightly, that pretty tale ended unhappily."

"Alas! yes."

"I blame the ladies. Why didn't they keep a sharp eye on the little witch?"

"Why, indeed? I have watched Syringa ever since she was thirteen."

That closed the incident. Rosetta enjoyed her last month hugely, and received many invitations to visit friends and kinsmen in the country, all of which she refused.

"I am Cinderella. I must go back to my kitchen. Whatever happens, I shall be able to boast that I have had one gorgeous time."

The Sisters welcomed her delightedly, concealing any disappointment they may have felt concerning rejected Under-secretaries and Pro-consuls. Charminster knew that Rosetta had captured hearts and flouted them; Charminster beheld the maid in her London frocks and sympathised with the victims. Laura Pogany said: "I expect she's waiting for a duke!" Everybody agreed that success had not turned the beauty's head. She slipped easily into the old grooves, laughing and chattering as if Charminster were the gayest place in the world.

"She is glad to get back," said Jacqueline to Prudence.

"She is more thoughtful."

"I have no regrets, Sister. How dull we should be without her!"

Nevertheless, Rosetta's wish to master plain cooking and plain sewing was pronounced "unsuitable." Jacqueline took much pleasure in buying her a tambour-frame and many skeins of silk; Prudence insisted that the dear child should take lessons on the mandoline from a lady lately settled in Charminster, who had known easier circumstances and was spoken of as a "decayed gentlewoman." Rosetta protested that she didn't want to learn the mandoline, but Prudence made a point of it, insisting that it would be a true charity. To please her, Rosetta consented. A certain amount of time, also, was devoted to visiting their humbler neighbours; but on such occasions Crump warned the housewives of an impending visit, and the august visitors were received with smiles and clean faces, upon floors diligently scrubbed. The usual questions were asked and answered, small donations of tea and coal were accepted with effusive gratitude, and then the ladies would sweep majestically on to other cottages. If Rosetta happened to observe "I'd like to examine the cupboards," Prudence would be sure to reply, in a tone of mild surprise, "Why, my love?" And then Rosetta would murmur: "They knew when we were coming, and the visiting face rather bores me. I want to know what is in the cupboards."

"Are you alluding to possible skeletons?"

"They would be rather exciting. Crump hinted to me that the bottle of port you gave to the Rockley children was drunk at one sitting by Rockley."

Invariably the ladies would lower their lids, looking down their noses; and Prudence would reply coldly: "Crump can hardly know that for a fact."

"Isn't it our business to find out if it is a fact?"

"Most certainly not."

At meetings of the S.P.G. Prudence presided with gracious dignity, eager to listen to details concerning the lives of the naked and unashamed heathen, details which she ignored when they concerned British subjects. Rosetta grumbled because so much money was sent out of Charminster which might have been spent in Hog Lane. To this, of course, Prudence made the orthodox answer: "We are commanded to carry the Gospel into distant lands."

Day by day, it became more abundantly plain to the girl that discussion upon themes already cut-and-dried by the Sisters was futile and exasperating.

During the early spring, Mr. Lovibond announced that the Bishop of the diocese would hold a Confirmation in May—an event of the deepest interest to the Misses Mauleverer. Candidates were instructed to present themselves at the Vicarage for due preparation; and the ladies undertook the mission of finding children who were eligible, but likely to hold back. With Rosetta, they made a grand tour of the cottages in the immediate vicinity of the Dower House. Prudence said to Mrs. Rockley:

"You will be glad to hear that the Bishop is coming to Charminster in May. George is quite old enough to be confirmed. Tell him to go to the Vicarage next Tuesday, at ten punctually."

Mrs. Rockley curtsied, saying nervously:

"Thank you, m'm; Garge 'e's gone for a soldier these two months, but Tom'll go gladly. That boy's allers ready for a lark."

Rosetta laughed. Prudence replied austerely: "Being confirmed is not a lark, Sarah Rockley. Kindly make that plain to Thomas, and see to it that he is clean and punctual in attendance."

Outside the cottage she said to Rosetta:

"Why did you laugh?"

"Oh, Prudence, I couldn't help it."

"I saw nothing to laugh at—did you, Jacqueline?"

"Nothing, Sister."

Other humours were developed in connection with this particular Confirmation. Custom and tradition ordained that the young girls presented to the Bishop should wear white muslin caps of a well-defined pattern. Calling upon Mrs. Veal, the wife of the gardener at the Dower House, Prudence was distressed to find that a proud mother of a pretty child had trimmed a cap with—lace!

"Fanny looks sweetly pretty in it, doesn't she, Miss?" Mrs. Veal asked Rosetta.

"Yes," said Rosetta, thoughtlessly.

"It is *most* unsuitable," observed Prudence. "Fanny cannot wear that."

Mrs. Veal, an obstinate woman, looked very sulky. "It only cost sixpence-ha'penny, and I bought it at Possnicker's."

"Where you bought it, Martha, and what you paid for it are matters quite irrelevant. Fanny cannot wear it."

"There's nothing, seemin'ly, in the Book about lace."

"Don't argue, my good woman. Fanny cannot be permitted to wear that cap."

But Mrs. Veal never budged from her position, and ultimately the Vicar was invited to interfere, which he did zealously, but ineffectually. Upon the eve of the Confirmation, Mrs. Veal was informed by authority that Fanny could not wear a lace cap and sit with the other girls. She must sit behind them, and be presented to his Lordship last of all. Then Mrs. Veal scored heavily in the presence of the Vicar and the Misses Mauleverer.

"Very well," she said, with heightened colour. "But we're told that the last shall be first and the first last."

Once more, to the distress of Prudence, Rosetta giggled.

During this springtime, an exciting letter arrived from Singapore, which Mrs. Lovibond showed to Rosetta. Septimus intimated that he might be offered preferment. "One of our fellows," he wrote, "has been scrapped. We are all very distressed about it; but it's part of the system, and exceptions can't be made. This particular chap was one of the ablest of the clerks, and everybody envied him when he was sent up the Irrawaddy to look after a big plantation. Unfortunately, jungle fever attacked him, and instead of coming back to Singapore he stuck it out. He's a wreck, poor chap, and our doctor says that he must leave the peninsula and not come back. It's tough luck for him, but there seems to be a chance of my succeeding him over the heads of men senior to me, which is complimentary. . . ."

Mrs. Lovibond and Rosetta stared at each other with anxious eyes.

"I hope he won't get it," said Rosetta defiantly.

"He must accept what is offered. His constitution is very strong."

By the next mail, word came that the appointment had been offered and accepted. "Don't worry," wrote Septimus; "I was never more fit, and I shall take particular precautions against the fever, which, as a rule, attacks the weaklings. The last man was rather anæmic and delicate. My screw is raised; and I shall get some big-game shooting. You won't hear from me for some time, as I shall be at the back of Nowhere. I shall be able to save nine-tenths of my salary. . . ."

"If he should be scrapped?" faltered Rosetta.

Mrs. Lovibond said grimly: "No fear of that. If it had to be, Septimus would scrap himself."

The summer passed slowly; and Rosetta tried not to compare it with the preceding season. The

Mauleverers were in Japan, and talked of spending the winter in America, amongst Mary's kinsmen. Sir Rodney Brough had returned long ago to South Africa, and his name appeared frequently in the papers as belonging to the most capable administrator of his day. Rosetta sometimes wondered: "Did he really care for me?"

She whiled away many hours sketching, having some talent for drawing in water-colour. The Sisters had not been able to afford proper instruction, and Rosetta practised her art under the simple tutelage of Miss Jacqueline, who never painted landscapes as they were, but as she liked them to be, with a rosy glow obscuring bad drawing. Rosetta watched her with amusement. Often a pretty effect, not at all in keeping with the sketch, was arrived at by happy chance. Jacqueline never destroyed the effects of happy chance, but gloated over them. When Rosetta murmured, "But with an evening sky you couldn't have a dark shadow in that corner," Jacqueline would hasten to answer: "My love, it looks so nice. I can't think how I got it. And, after all, the true aim of art is to beautify."

Rosetta would answer dubiously: "All the same, I like books and pictures to be convincing."

"Realism," sighed the elder lady, "is so brutal sometimes."

Nevertheless, Rosetta could look back upon this period with a lively satisfaction. To use an expression of Septimus, she "played up." She walked with the Sisters upon the high ground, where the air was more bracing, and she constrained herself to adopt the easy gait, the leisurely stroll of middle-age which marches so comfortably with the ideas and conversation of middle-age. The girl fell into the habit of acquiescence, adopting the familiar "I quite agree" of Jacqueline.

In August they went to Bognor, and at Bognor pleasant words came from the Head of the Family, asking Rosetta to spend the next season at Mauleverer House and concluding: "Madame Prune's bill will be paid cheerfully by me." This heartened the Sisters to fresh hopes and ambitions. Alone together, they prattled of the match that the dear child would make. The sun shone gloriously in their azure skies.

Towards the close of August, Prudence received a letter from Mrs. Lovibond, which she read, according to inviolate custom, after finishing her second cup of tea.

"Oh dear!" she exclaimed, with deep concern.

Jacqueline saw that something of grave import had happened.

"What is the matter, Sister? You are quite pale."

Prudence answered tremulously: "Dear Mrs. Lovibond writes in sore trouble. Septimus, it seems, has been mauled by a tiger."

Neither of the ladies was looking at Rosetta. She controlled her quivering face, as she asked:

"Badly mauled?"

"I fear so. A fellow-clerk has sent the sad news."

"The dear boy is strong," said Jacqueline; "he will get over it."

"Yes," said Rosetta calmly.

CHAPTER VIII

RUBBISH TO THE VOID

WHEN Rosetta returned to Charminster, a few days later, Mrs. Lovibond showed to her the letter from the fellow-clerk.

"Septimus," it ran, "has been mauled by a tiger, which imprudently he tackled on foot. He behaved with the most splendid courage and presence of mind. The brute sprang upon him, and began gnawing his shoulder. He lay as one dead, which saved his life, but we are terribly afraid that he may lose his arm. His shikarri was able to despatch the tiger; and then had the greatest difficulty in getting Septimus back to his bungalow, and thence down the river to a place where he could be attended to. The delay, and the great loss of blood, brought about ugly complications, but the doctor now in attendance is reasonably sure that the worst is over. I will write again by the next mail. . . ."

A dreadful week of suspense followed. Rosetta was obliged to mask her feelings in the presence of the Sisters; but her pale face distressed them. Jacqueline whispered to Prudence: "This accident to Septimus has upset the child." The ladies avoided each other's eyes, and Prudence muttered: "She is very sympathetic." In their hearts they wondered uneasily if the "mild flirtation" had been more serious than they had supposed ; but the habit of ignoring what they did not wish to believe sustained them. The child was suffering because an old friend lay at death's door. Nevertheless, they were extremely tender with her and with the unhappy mother, who seemed to be ten years older.

The second letter ended the cruel suspense. Septimus would live, but his left arm was gone, and the doctor had no doubt whatever that the recovery would be slow—a matter of months, possibly years !

" He will be scrapped ! " exclaimed Rosetta, bursting into passionate tears.

At the bottom of the letter were some crosses feebly made with a pencil. When the mother thought of the strong hand that had inscribed those crosses she wept also, and the words of comfort which she tried to whisper to Rosetta died upon her quivering lips.

" I love him more than ever," said Rosetta. " This makes no difference to me ; I shall have to wait longer—that's all."

Mrs. Lovibond kissed her in silence.

The next mail brought better news. Septimus was back in Singapore, and his wounds were healing. The Sisters heard Rosetta laugh, and consoled themselves with the conviction that they were right in assuming that the affair had not been serious. The child was her dear self again !

At the end of a fortnight Septimus wrote in pencil to his mother :

" DEAREST MOTHER,

" I have resigned my position. Nothing else is possible. Three doctors are unanimous in declaring that the climate here would kill me in my enfeebled condition. I have saved 200*l.*, and I shall begin again in a new country. I am sailing to New Zealand next month, and the sea voyage ought to put me on my legs. I shall not come home.

"I am too weak to write more. Please give the enclosed packet to Rosetta. She will understand what I mean by returning to her my most precious possession.

"Your loving son,
"SEPTIMUS."

The packet contained nothing but the tress of hair.

Alone in her room at the Dower House, Rosetta locked the door and examined the tress of her hair very carefully with brightening eyes. He had not sent back all of it!

Fortified by this conviction, she decided to break her word, and write to her lover. She wrote half a dozen letters, many of them stained with tears, but the one that was sent indicated no trace of the misery that consumed her:

"MY DARLING SEPTIMUS,

"I love you, and I shall always love you. If I could come to you I would do so, and I will come as soon as I am of age. That is what comforts me. I know that you will get well, and that you will accomplish more with one arm than other men can do with two. Poverty does not frighten me, and I am determined to find out how poor people live, so that I can be a real help to you. The Sisters object to my cooking, and making my own gowns, but I shall find a way. If I could learn drawing properly, I might earn something. I must make you understand that money is nothing to me without you. I ache with longing to be near you. I am desperately jealous of your nurse, whoever she may be. Oh, Septimus, I don't think you know how much I love you!—

"Your faithful
"ROSETTA."

This was sealed and despatched to the *Poste Restante*, Auckland, New Zealand, the address given by Septimus to his mother.

Then she attempted valiantly to take up her daily life, and make the most of it. Months must elapse before she could receive an answer to her letter.

We append a chronicle of her day's doing.

She rose at seven, and descended to the drawing-room, where she practised, upon an aged and infirm piano, Czerny's Scales and Exercises. She was aware that she had no real aptitude for music, and that she had been badly taught by Jacqueline, but the Sisters liked to hear her play what used to be called *morceaux de salon*—tinkly melodies, such as "Les Cloches de Monastère," "The Maiden's Prayer," and Thalberg's "Home, Sweet Home," in which the *arpeggios* were quite beyond her powers. At nine, Prudence read family prayers; and at a quarter-past nine the bacon was attacked and consumed with dry bread. No Mauleverer ate butter with either bacon or jam! After breakfast, Prudence devoted an hour to household management —a task peculiarly her own, never shared by either

Jacqueline or Rosetta. While she was thus occupied, Jacqueline and Rosetta would translate a French book, such as " Les Malheurs de Sophie," or " Un Philosophe sous les Toits." At half-past eleven the three sisters met in the inner drawing-room for the serious reading of the day, beginning with the leading article in *The Times* and going on to some instructive biography or history. At one, they lunched solidly upon plain boiled or roast. After luncheon, Jacqueline and Prudence retired to their bedrooms for a composing nap. The walk upon the high ground, or into Charminster, followed. The tradesmen greeted the ladies with deferential courtesy. Mr. Possnicker, the draper, invariably hurried from his office to wait upon the Honourable Miss Mauleverer; Skillicorn, the fishmonger, reserved for her his freshest soles, although perfectly aware that Prudence might reply graciously: " I think we will take plaice to-day, Mr. Skillicorn." The butcher, for his part, made it a point of honour to offer the ladies the refusal of sweetbreads!

After tea, unless there were visitors, the Sisters were occupied with a correspondence sufficiently voluminous. They liked to keep in touch with kinswomen whom they had not seen for a decade; and their envelopes, pale grey in colour, were sealed with a wafer displaying the initials of each lady entwined in a pretty cypher. After dinner, Rosetta would play the piano for half an hour, and then Prudence would read aloud some light and agreeable fiction. Jacqueline adored Sir Walter Scott; Prudence preferred Thackeray; but the works of Miss Yonge were deemed the mental food proper to Rosetta's tender years. There had been a long and

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drastic course of Miss Edgeworth, Mrs. Sherwood, and that delightful authoress, Ann Fraser-Tytler.

After much discussion, and not without heart-burnings, it had been decided by Prudence that Rosetta was now old enough to listen to "The Scarlet Letter," a book destined to play a part in her mental development and future life. From the beginning, she was absorbed by the amazing romance. But, to the consternation of the Sisters, she began to ask inconvenient questions. After the second chapter, as Prudence was adjusting the book-marker, Rosetta said reflectively:

"Is the breaking of the Seventh Commandment a more deadly sin than the breaking of the others?"

Prudence considered this, while Jacqueline bent over her tambour-frame. Rosetta continued:

"Is it, for instance, as deadly as breaking the Sixth?"

"In my opinion, child—yes."

"Oh! Then why do we punish the breaking of the Sixth with death?"

"In a very real sense," said Prudence austerely, "the breaking of the Seventh Commandment is punished by death."

"I don't quite understand."

"It is impossible for you, my dear, quite to understand. When you are older you will discover that the breaking of this particular Commandment means moral death. The offenders, like Hester Prynne, are regarded as without the pale."

"Were some of our kings so regarded?"

"My child!"

"Was David so regarded?"

"We cannot discuss characters in sacred history."

The reading continued next day, although Prudence said confidentially to Jacqueline: "We are not happy in the choice of this book."

"I quite agree; but now that we have begun it——?"

"We must go on."

To their distress, it soon became manifest that Rosetta was filled with an immense and disproportionate sympathy for the mother of little Pearl. To Prudence's horror, she exclaimed:

"I love Hester. I don't care what she did, I love her. And I think she was outrageously treated by those beasts of Puritans. I'm glad their days are over."

"They are not over, Rosetta," said Prudence. "In this town to-day, if a woman behaves shamelessly, she is punished as Hester was punished."

Rosetta jumped up excitedly:

"You don't mean to say that if Hester Prynne were walking about Charminster you would refuse to speak to her?"

"We are at liberty," replied Prudence frigidly, "to form what friends and acquaintances we please. Speaking for myself, I would refuse to know Hester Prynne."

"I should be kind to the child," faltered Jacqueline.

To the amazement of the ladies, Rosetta burst into tears and fled from the room. Slowly Prudence rose from her chair, crossed the room, and placed the volume on its shelf beside "Mosses from an Old Manse."

"For the present," she said firmly, "we will confine ourselves to lighter fiction."

"Yes," said Jacqueline. She added apologetically: "The dear love has such a tender heart."

"She has always been lacking in restraint."

Before prayers, next morning, Rosetta entreated pardon. Prudence, as she kissed a flushed cheek, said graciously:

"The book is—upsetting. We won't finish it."

Rosetta hesitated. Then she said in a low voice: "I did not mean to tell you, Prudence, but last night, when you were asleep, I stole downstairs, found the book on its shelf, took it upstairs—and finished it!"

Prudence frowned. Reading in bed, a bed embellished by muslin curtains, had been strictly forbidden.

"Oh, Rosetta!" gasped Jacqueline.

"I simply couldn't help it."

"No more shall be said," pronounced Prudence. "The incident has been painful, but it is closed."

When the evening came, Prudence opened Miss Yonge's latest novel.

"Read this, Rosetta. I obtained it from Mudie's this afternoon."

"Dear Miss Yonge is so safe," added Jacqueline.

"But you promised me that we should read 'Adam Bede' next."

"I have changed my mind."

"Can't we compromise on 'The Newcomes'?"

"Why not?" asked Jacqueline. "Thackeray, Sister, is your favourite author."

Rosetta, perceiving that the situation was strained, thought fit to attempt to relax it with the remark—

"Laura Pogany tells me that Ouida is simply splendid."

"Ouida!"

Rosetta had not read any of Ouida's books, but she divined that she had been indiscreet.

"I am positive," said Prudence, "that Mrs. Pogany can have no idea that Laura is reading Ouida. A hint to her will not be out of place."

"Oh, please, don't betray me."

"I much fear," said Prudence solemnly, "that Laura has been reading Ouida on the sly."

CHAPTER IX

AVE, CÆSAR!

THROUGHOUT that winter Rosetta remained in Charminster, although she received more than one invitation to visit country houses. Those invitations had to be declined, because in the 'seventies young ladies of the upper class were not permitted to travel alone. Also, it was impossible for the Sisters to replenish Rosetta's wardrobe "suitably." The Head of the Family would return to England in March, and then there would be the excitement of another visit to Madame Prune. Meanwhile, Rosetta had little to beguile her lively imagination except speculation in regard to the letter she was expecting from Septimus. He wrote to his mother from Auckland, much depressed in spirits. The sea voyage, from which so much was hoped, had been very trying on account of boisterous weather. "Tempest-tossed I am," he declared, "and in dry dock for repairs." He wrote from some hospital, explaining curtly that his wounds were not yet healed. Notwithstanding, he had made friends with an editor, and had done work for him. He added in quite his old style: "The good fellow scoffed at my suggestion to supply him with first impressions.

Every travelling Briton bothers him to death with such applications. I assured him that I had an original touch of my own, which he would recognise on sight, and backed up the bluff with a sample of my wares. He is kind enough to say that I have the makings of a journalist, which I have always known. . . ."

Throughout December, Rosetta was the first to enter the drawing-room, where the morning correspondence was placed beside Prudence's napkin, and subject to her inspection. Upon Christmas Eve the long-expected letter arrived. Rosetta slipped it into a pocket, wondering whether Crump had perceived the stamp. She read it, shivering with cold, in the familiar trysting-place beneath the elm tree, which had been "blasted by lightning."

"MY ROSETTA,

"You are a dear and a sweet, and enshrined for ever as such in my memory. Now I shall talk like a father. What torments me more than any physical pain is the thought that I may have destroyed your chance of happiness. You are made to be loved. I have seen you look at children, dirty little brats some of them, with an expression in your eyes which told me that your life would never be complete till you had babies of your own. Before God, I swear solemnly that such peace as I may yet achieve depends upon your marriage with the right sort. I am—derelict. No, not quite that, but a wreck of a man, stranded here, and likely to go to pieces at any moment. If you did come to me, I should be tempted to kill myself. If you saw me, you would understand.

"I don't ask you to cast me out of your heart, but I do beseech you to find room in it for a husband and children. It is big enough to house a large family. If I know anything of you, the life in Charminster will be more than you can bear. Those old moss-grown towns of England distil happiness for some women, but for ardent spirits misery and heart-sickness. You will not be allowed to work, as your own mother worked; and you have not the strength of will, nor perhaps the hardness of heart, to cut loose from sisters who are devoted to you, and yet, unhappily, so utterly different from you. For my sake, for your own sake, for your sisters' sake, take hold of life and shape it in obedience to natural laws. Thousands of lonely women are staring at faded photographs, when they might be kissing the faces of children. Too late they find out their mistake. Sometimes I have a nightmare vision of you, old, haggard, soured, wearing the willow for me, ruined by me. That thought grinds me to powder.

"Yours faithfully,
"SEPTIMUS."

Rosetta read the letter three times. The writer's strength diffused itself through her mind and body. Often she had wondered whether Septimus loved her with the passion which she felt for him, but which she was too innocent and ignorant to analyse. Now, suddenly, she realised that his love was greater than hers. Afterwards, she knew that this letter had made a woman of her. He revealed to her—herself; plumbed the deeps of her soul, into which she peered for the first time, into which, hitherto she had not dared to look. Till this moment marriage with Septimus had meant—what? A joy undefined, a satisfaction inarticulate, an intensity of emotion magnified because it was apprehended dimly, something tremendous and overwhelming, like a mountain seen for the first time through encompassing mists.

Slowly the mists rolled away.

Rosetta returned to the Dower House through the garden, so charming in summer, so desolate and forlorn in December. She stared at the high walls bristling with broken glass, at the trees blackened by smoke, at the bare earth, and the grass discoloured and seared by frost. Septimus was dead —and buried in New Zealand. He desired that she should so regard him, and his will was still potent. The last word had been said.

During the night it snowed, and the Misses Mauleverer walked to church through a white landscape beneath an illuminating rather than a warming sun. Rosetta wore a fur jacket, a present from her sisters, the outward sign of many small acts of self-denial which ought to have taken some of the chill from her heart. She wondered miserably: "Shall I ever feel warm again?"

It happened that a stranger preached the sermon —a small, thin, old man, with an ascetic face redeemed from ugliness by a fine pair of eyes. Mr. Lovibond, narrow of mind in the pulpit and noisy in manner, sat in his comfortable stall, looking sleekly florid and well-nourished. The stranger gave out the familiar text: "Unto us a Child is born."

The theme was treated with a simplicity and directness that challenged attention at once. The preacher began impressively, leaning forward, and speaking in a low clear voice, which at times quavered oddly. Often he paused, evidently seeking for the right word, or perhaps selecting it. Invariably it was the right word.

" I, who speak to you, am a childless man."

The shufflings of many feet, the rustling of skirts, the whispering, the irritating coughs, died away into silence, as the stranger allowed his statement to sink in. Prudence Mauleverer raised her head, Jacqueline shivered, opening wide her soft blue eyes; Rosetta glanced at Mrs. Lovibond sitting alone in her pew, rigid with attention.

" And although I speak to all of you, my message is more particularly delivered to those like myself who have been denied the supreme benediction of children, and to those who have lost children."

The clear voice was monotonous—not deliberately so, for the man was no actor, no rhetorician. The colourless tones, the pale patient face, the bent figure, were eloquent of a life not barren in the finer sense, but sterile, as most of us understand the word, of mundane joys and gratified ambitions. Obviously, the man had suffered cruelly from ill-health and poverty, and the myriad disabilities inseparable from such conditions. Revealing without words the long lean years of his own drab past, he evoked, also, a panoramic vision of the deserts in which others had wandered, the arid sands of each particular wilderness. Rosetta saw two tears trickling down Jacqueline's cheeks and falling unheeded upon the dark-grey silk mantle kept so immaculate from stains.

"We are assured elsewhere," the preacher continued, "that the Child was given more especially to those who needed Him most. How dear the gift has been to the innumerable men and women constrained to lead celibate lives I dare not say; and it is not my intention to harrow your feelings by dwelling upon what we have lost. I ask you rather to join with me in computing our gain, to forget, if we can, the bitterness in our hearts, and to remember the gladness only—the Gospel which a Child brought, more precious than the gold and frankincense and myrrh of the Wise Men."

As he spoke, he became transformed. Colour flowed into his cheeks and voice. A blind man would have affirmed that the preacher was young and strong, essentially vital, one from whom virtue flowed.

The sermon dealt with children, and the wisdom of children—surely a marvel to all sages. It seemed to Rosetta that a child was speaking, an old man who had remained a child in purity, in sincerity, in faith. He touched upon Christ's visit to the Temple, when He was twelve years old.

"It must have struck you," he said, "as curious that those learned scribes should have listened to a Boy and marvelled at His understanding. I cannot believe that a miracle was performed. I do not suppose, for an instant, that this Child instructed those Doctors of the Law upon subjects to which their lives had been devoted. It is more reasonable to suppose that He revealed the wisdom that the so-called wise are too apt to ignore, and which in all its manifestations is divine and not of this earth at all. I submit to you that the Child spoke of love—love for everything and everybody outside Himself—a striking and original theme at a time when the world was ruled by Hate and Terror. Small wonder that those hard men were astonished! A child's capacity for loving must be amazing to all who attempt to measure it."

He gave instances, illustrating the wisdom of child-like love, its quality of commanding recognition; its fluidity, percolating everywhere; its affinity, from a chemical point of view, with every lawful object of human endeavour.

"Labour alone," he exclaimed, "will not conquer all things; but inspired and sustained by love it is indeed invincible."

If he strayed occasionally from the children, he always returned to them, as if ill at ease when apart from them. He concluded with an odd abruptness—

"The pagan mythology affirmed that Wisdom sprang, full-grown and armed, from the head of Zeus. Love appeared to Christians as a little child."

Rosetta rose from her knees, feeling much warmer, for in the middle of the sermon Jacqueline's hand had sought hers, and the gentle pressure seemed to say: "You came to us as a child, and you will never quite know how dear you have been, because the gift of tongues has not yet been vouchsafed to us." As the three sisters walked home at the leisurely pace which Prudence had never been known to exceed, Rosetta kept on asking herself this question: "How did Septimus find out what I did not know myself until yesterday?"

According to custom the Christmas dinner was served in the middle of the day. Crump brought in a blazing pudding which had been stirred in its making by each of the sisters. In it had been dropped a thimble, a gold ring, and half a crown. Jacqueline had long since insisted upon the half-crown, because she had read somewhere of a child being choked by swallowing a sixpence. Upon this occasion, much to Jacqueline's delight, Rosetta secured both the ring and the piece of silver. Whereupon, with old-fashioned courtesy, Prudence toasted the maid as matron. A gracious smile vanished from her face, when Rosetta exclaimed:

"I wish one could have children without being married!"

Jacqueline glanced round, to assure herself that Crump had left the dining-room.

"My dear child!" she gasped. Rosetta continued calmly:

"I mean it. Dr. Pogany says that there are many more women than men. We can't all be married; but it does seem rather unfair that we should not have children."

To this Prudence replied austerely:

"Really, you must break yourself of this habit of saying extraordinary things. They are liable to misconstruction."

Rosetta, quite undaunted, went on: "If I could have a baby by holding up my finger, I should hold up one now." She held up two fingers.

"You talk too much nonsense for a girl of your age. I trust you said nothing of this kind to Dr. Pogany."

"He would have laughed."

"If you like being laughed at, there is nothing more to say."

During the afternoon she went up to the Vicarage, wondering whether Septimus had written to his mother. When Mrs. Lovibond kissed her she divined not only that he had written, but that the letter was not intended for her eyes. She said quickly:

"Septimus has written to me; and he has written to you?"

"Yes."

Rosetta glanced as usual at the photograph of her lover, and then uttered a sharp exclamation. Beside it, not yet framed, was another photograph—a small group, badly composed and badly taken—a fair enough specimen of what amateur photography could accomplish in those days.

"It can't be Septimus?" gasped Rosetta, snatching it up.

Mrs. Lovibond answered gently.

"He wished you to see it."

The two women gazed hungrily at a man seated in a wicker-chair. He looked terribly ill, wasted to a shadow, and the lower part of his face, the strong chin and firm lips, was completely hidden by a beard, grown, no doubt, to hide a scar. A stout smiling fellow stood beside him—probably the doctor—and a youthful native was in attendance.

"I don't care how he looks," said Rosetta defiantly.

But even then in her heart she knew that this was not true. The shock of seeing him so changed had been appalling, the more so because she realised that henceforward she would always see him as he was, not as he used to be. To prevent herself from bursting into unavailing sobs, she said fiercely:

"How I hate that fat smiling man!"

"Septimus tells me that the fat smiling man is raising him from the dead."

Rosetta kissed the photograph, and laid it face down upon the table.

"I pray that I may never see it again."

The mother knew that the *coup de grace* had been given.

The winter months passed slowly. Long before the March winds had ceased to blow the Sisters became anxious about "the child." Behind her back, they discussed interminably her fading colour, her listlessness, her lack of appetite, which they tried ineffectually to tempt with dainty dishes. Not even to each other did they mention the name of Septimus. The blinds between him and them remained down. Dr. Pogany fell back upon the last resource of baffled family practitioners. He prescribed a change of air. Prudence spoke tentatively of letting the Dower House and spending a year in Italy. Rosetta, however, refused almost angrily to leave Charminster, knowing that the letting of their home would be misery to the Sisters.

"I shall be all right in the spring," she declared.

At the end of March, the Mauleverers returned to England; and within a week a letter arrived from the Head of the Family, enclosing a cheque for 250*l.* The delight of the two ladies withered protest before it left Rosetta's lips, but she was unable to feign an adequate enthusiasm. Jacqueline said to Prudence:

"I thought she would jump out of her skin with delight. Upon my word, I believe that the child would prefer to stay at home, if we left the matter to her."

"She is below par," said Prudence solemnly. "There is nothing else the matter with her—absolutely nothing."

"I quite agree," Jacqueline hastened to add.

The visit to Madame Prune exercised a tonic effect. Madame was emphatic in declaring that Mademoiselle was more lovely than ever. In a sense this was true. Rosetta's face had gained distinction and charm.

"Mademoiselle is more of the lily and less of the rose: is it not so?"

Jacqueline replied: "Quite, quite; and your frocks, Madame, will put the colour back into those white cheeks."

"Perfectly. It is a privilege to do good in that way."

In the afternoon the ladies visited the Zoological Gardens, where an exciting incident happened. They were in the old Lion House, which used to contain two handsome leopards. Prudence remarked with astonishment that a man was standing close to the leopards' cage, and then the three ladies perceived that he had thrust his arm through the bars, and was scratching the leopard's head. They could hear the great beast purring contentedly.

"How extremely reckless!" Prudence exclaimed.

"He must be a privileged person," said Rosetta.

"We should not be allowed in there," murmured Jacqueline.

The man withdrew his arm, and turned.

"It's Cæsar!" exclaimed Rosetta.

"Who?"

"Sir Rodney Brough."

As she spoke, Sir Rodney recognised her, after a quick, penetrating glance. He raised his hat, and approached.

"I'm so glad to see you again," he said, holding out his hand.

Rosetta introduced the Sisters, and Jacqueline, fascinated by the hand that ventured to caress wild beasts, said shyly—

"I am distressed, Sir Rodney, that you should imperil a life so valuable as yours."

His grim face relaxed.

"I only risked a hand. That leopard belonged to me."

"Would it let me stroke it?" asked Rosetta.

"You have courage."

"If you told me it was quite safe, I should have no fear."

He bowed in a somewhat old-fashioned manner, which pleased the Sisters mightily, but he said slowly—

"It would not be safe. Are you staying in town?"

"I am spending the season with my cousins."

"Then we shall meet soon."

"I hope you will have something exciting to tell me."

Quite unconsciously, she had assumed the gay manner which had so attracted him two years before. Her eyes sparkled, a dimple showed in her cheek.

"Exciting? I shall try to be prepared. Why do you like excitement?"

"Because I've had so little of it. The first thrill I've enjoyed for three months was when I saw your arm thrust through those bars."

"You had recognised me?"

"Not then."

He laughed, and took leave of the ladies, who watched him walk away with interested eyes. A keeper joined the great man, standing hat in hand before him.

"An impressive personality," said Prudence.

"His eyes are wild," remarked Jacqueline.

"So they are," said Rosetta. "It's odd, but I never realised that till you said so. They are wild. They look as if they had seen strange sights; and so they have. He frightens most people, but he never frightened me. Mauleverer hardly dared to speak to him, but I used to stroke his head."

"Good gracious!"

"Figuratively, of course. I'm glad that he's at home again."

"He doesn't look quite at home, dear," said Jacqueline.

"Jacqueline, you've scored again. He told me that he never felt at ease in a tall hat. Wouldn't he make a magnificent Red Indian—a Sioux chief? Can't you see him in feathers, brandishing a tomahawk?"

"No, indeed," Jacqueline answered. "I prefer him in a frock-coat." Then she perpetrated a mild joke: "Perhaps he does feel at home amongst the lions."

CHAPTER X

THE INEVITABLE

ROSETTA, of course, relieved her soul by telling Mary Mauleverer everything. Mary, a gifted listener, held her hand and squeezed it sympathetically from time to time. The girl ended on a high note—

"I shall become an old maid."

"You aren't one yet."

"Nothing else is possible for me."

Mary smiled faintly, still holding Rosetta's hand. Then she said abruptly—

"Do you consider Mauleverer and me a happy couple?"

"You were made for each other. He adores you; and you adore him."

"Certainly, we hit it off; but I began by adoring, as you call it, somebody else, and so did Mauleverer. I fancy that he had at least eleven bad attacks."

"If you mean——"

"I am telling you the truth. I was head over heels in love with a man whom I happened to meet the other day. He suffers from suppressed gout, and breathes heavily. The moment I saw him I thought, 'What an escape!'"

"Did he care very much for you?"

"He swore so. And I'm sure he meant it."

"Why didn't you marry?"

"We were too poor. I hadn't a penny of my own then. He wrote the most charming love-letters in the world. Would you like to see one? I know he wouldn't mind."

"No, thank you," Rosetta replied, with asperity.

Mary dropped her light tone.

"I didn't mean to joke about it, dear. Heaven knows it was no joke to either of us at the time. And yet—here I am, happy and contented."

Rosetta thought: "Heartless lot, all of them!" Nevertheless, behind the thought wriggled an uneasy conviction that Mary was not heartless, and, indisputably, she was happy and able to make happy her husband and children.

Sir Rodney Brough lunched at Mauleverer House upon the following Sunday, and talked to Rosetta afterwards.

"Cæsar won't be defeated this time," said Mauleverer to his wife.

"Personally, I hope she will resist him."

"Why?"

"He fills me with an odd repulsion, something instinctive. He looks like a man with an ugly secret."

"Well, of all the rubbish—! And you, a sensible woman."

"More sensible than you think, because I never mistrust my instincts. Instinct, not reason, led me to marry you."

"Cæsar has ugly secrets, not of his own, but other folk's—a remarkable collection."

"He is Cæsar to you and Bluebeard to me. I have a delightful young fellow for Rosetta. It's so amusing—she met the wife of her Under-Secretary last night. Do you remember how smitten he was? Proposed about five times and threatened to chuck politics. Rosetta blushed when she saw his devotion to his wife."

"Trot out your young fellow by all means, but I back the old 'un."

Meanwhile, colour flowed back into Rosetta's cheeks—the valiant blood which made her sisters accept poverty and isolation with serenity and cheerfulness. And, naturally enough, Mayfair appealed to her tremendously, swept her out of a backwater into the full current of life's stream, where other craft challenged interest and intelligence. Syringa, whom she had left a shy girl, had ceased to be an echo of her mother, and was now able to talk with animation and wit of what she had seen on her travels, and in particular of America, where she had met some sprightly kinsmen.

"I like their point of view," she declared to Rosetta. "It's so different from ours."

"In what way?"

"American girls of our age run things. They are encouraged to do so. The parents take a back seat."

"I wish Prudence could hear you."

"Six months in New York would open her dear old eyes."

"Never!"

"Ten days opened mine. Everybody is wide awake. That is their great quality. I'm sure they're not cleverer than we are, but they see more. Here, Age seems to be too jealous of Youth."

"This is an old country."

"That's it. And perhaps we know too much and get frightened too easily. They do go it over there."

"Leap before they look?"

"Look and leap in a jiffy, no craning at the big places! We had some jolly hunts in the Meadowbrook country. The way they went at the big timber was simply amazing. And father, who confesses that he sees mother and me upon the far side of the fences, went as hard as any of 'em."

"It's smartened you up, Syringa."

"Mother intended it should. My ideas worry father a little, but, as I told him the other day, once a Mauleverer always a Mauleverer." She laughed softly, adding in the expressive slang of the hunting-field, "I cut him down more than once."

"He allowed you to take your own line?"

Syringa laughed gaily.

"I never asked for permission. I took it. And, Rosetta, it pays to take one's own line. Life's a big hunt anyway, and why should we potter along behind the fogies?"

"We may have to."

"I don't believe it. We're too afraid of coming to grief over here, and often we come to grief when pottering. Look at poor Whyte-Melville! The worst toss father ever had was over a rabbit-hole."

"Some of us have to potter along."

"I won't admit the necessity. And we're too easily discouraged. We don't jump up quickly when we're knocked down. We sit, where we fall, dazed."

Rosetta stared hard at her cousin. Did she know anything? Did she guess? Syringa's ingenuous face answered the questions. Rosetta murmured reflectively, "There's a lot in what you say."

"It seems odd to you that I should talk like this. They shout over there what we hardly dare to think here. Personally, I feel emancipated."

"You're not afraid of big words, Syringa."

"I've enlarged my vocabulary. Why, I used to hold my tongue two years ago and dream in words of one syllable."

Before May was out Cæsar asked Rosetta to marry him. He was accustomed to deal drastically with men, and he had been supremely successful with savages and semi-savages. His work in South Africa was finished, and the Government had just offered him a five years' appointment in India as governor of a vast province densely populated with the poorest Hindus. It remained to be seen—as *The Times* pointed out—whether a man pre-eminently successful in the handling of Basutos would display subtler qualities in ruling Orientals.

Sir Rodney wasted no words at any time. He said abruptly:

"I want you to be my wife. I can offer you many things women value; but I am forty-five and as ugly as sin."

"I don't love you," said Rosetta calmly.

She was not feeling calm, and his eyes frightened her. They stared at her angrily, as a tiger might glare at his "kill." A tiger had mangled Septimus. She could not detach her mind from tigers.

"I'll chance that," he replied hoarsely.

Unquestionably he was moved, and this spectacle of a strong man vibrating with emotion which was the more potent because repressed had a peculiar fascination.

"I loved a man who is dead. Dead to me, I mean; but the memory of him will never die."

As she spoke his face grew very grim; but, after a pause, he said emphatically:

"I never look back. The present is mine and the future. I ask you to share them. We will not speak again of the past."

She hesitated, trying to find words to refuse him graciously without undue laceration of his feelings. He may have divined this. Hurriedly, with an odd violence of appeal, he continued:

"I shall plead my cause frankly. Plain speech never hurt an honest woman with brains to understand it. I am not such an optimist as to hope that I could inspire in you the sort of love which is found in schoolgirls' dreams. I want you badly. I have wanted you from the first hour we met. Also, I want something else. I want a son."

She trembled, and he saw it.

"I want a son," he repeated. "And I want a working partner in work worth the doing—work which has been and will be richly rewarded. They say that I go to India with a peerage in my pocket. Perhaps. I declare to you that such honours weigh little with me. But it would please me to pass them on. I submit another point for your consideration. I allow nothing to interfere with my work. If you marry me you will have more liberty than most English wives—liberty and the opportunity to make of your future what you will. One moment—I beg you not to answer me now. Take time."

"Thank you," she said gratefully.

Three days passed, and then she accepted him. It is impossible to analyse her conflicting sensibilities, because she was too young and inexperienced to analyse them for herself. The tremendous instinct of the natural woman to select, often unconsciously, a strong man to be the father of her children dominated her overwhelmingly.

Nearly as irresistible and far more easy to measure was the desire to escape from bondage, from loving, inexorable petty tyrannies, from a dull town which held poignant memories and associations.

Significantly she shrank from consulting Mary Mauleverer or Syringa. In her weakness she turned to the Head of the Family, who patted her hands and said genially, "Your Excellency is a most fortunate young woman."

Perhaps this taking for granted that she would accept the great man turned the nicely balanced scales. Mauleverer had a thruster's way with him —a primitive directness of speech and purpose which never fails to impress a vacillating woman. He continued with conviction, "It's the real right thing for him and you."

She protested faintly, "I hardly know him."

"He is the greatest administrator we have. Do you think it likely that he will make a muddle of his domestic affairs?"

He laughed derisively, making Rosetta feel that she was foolish to have asked such a question.

"You would give Syringa to him?"

"Rather! Of course, at your age, my dear child, you can't be expected to know what really counts and what doesn't."

"If—if he should not be kind to me? He admitted that he was wrapped up in his own work."

"Kind?" The big fellow roared with laughter. "Look in your glass, my pretty! Kind! He'll be kind, never fear! Don't you know that you've conquered him? Kind! What a word!"

"I told him about Septimus."

Mauleverer whistled.

"Did you, now? Well, that may have been a mistake. Cæsar didn't unroll *his* past, did he?"

"No."

"Looks to me as if he might be jealous; dash of the Othello—hey?"

Rosetta said scornfully:

"I should give Sir Rodney no cause for jealousy."

"I am sure of that; all the same I shouldn't have lugged in the other fellow. However, it's done. And now, my dear, as Sir Rodney is not getting any younger, and you could not possibly be more beautiful, the sooner we all pop off to church the better."

Kind compensation usually ordains that the course of love which is not quite true should run smooth, at any rate till the wedding day. The Sisters arrived from Charminster a-flutter with excitement and gratification; Mauleverer gave *carte blanche* to Madame Prune to furnish a trousseau worthy of herself and the occasion. In fine, no young lady of position and beauty was more easily married.

To Rosetta the hours sped by with an alarming swiftness; and her time was fully occupied in the trying on and fitting of innumerable frocks and the acknowledgment of presents from hundreds of men and women. At Sir Rodney's request she read certain books, also dealing exhaustively with the conditions of the province to which Cæsar had been appointed. She had touched shyly upon the servant question, and looked confounded when he replied :

" You will have about eight hundred, more or less." And then he asked brusquely, " How many evening gowns have you ordered ? "

" Twelve."

" Order twelve more—on my account."

" But, Rodney, surely——"

He cut her short, pleasantly but finally—

" Order twelve more."

To the Sisters the whole affair presented the aspect of a marvellous romance. For a day or two Jacqueline spoke of Rosetta as Cinderella. She sighed with satisfaction when Sir Rodney sent a tiara to Mauleverer House ; she positively gloated over the under-linen, and pronounced it fit for a princess. One fly—an insignificant insect—buried itself in her precious ointment. She murmured to Prudence—

" The child is not very expansive."

Prudence answered, with slight acidity—

" Would you like her to gush ? "

" Of course not, but I thought—I hoped—that she would say something."

" In my opinion Rosetta is behaving admirably, with a restraint which surprises and delights me. I am entirely satisfied."

" Yes, yes," said Jacqueline hurriedly. " Do you find *him* a little frightening ? "

"Not at all. His devotion is very marked."

"To be sure! Indeed, I have to pinch myself to realise that it is not a wonderful dream."

After the ceremony, bride and groom left London for Paris, *en route* for Touraine, where the honeymoon was to be passed in the garden of France. The Sisters returned to Charminster, arriving at the Dower House in time for tea, served as usual in the half of the drawing-room which looked upon the garden. The other half, seldom used, had windows opening upon Hog Lane, and was separated from the more informal sitting-room by folding-doors. Jacqueline went upstairs to take off her bonnet and mantle, and lingered some few minutes with Crump, who, after assisting to array the bride in her bravery, had witnessed the ceremony from a front seat in the gallery of the church. When Jacqueline came downstairs she found Prudence alone in the front drawing-room, staring fixedly at the portrait in pastel of Rosetta. The blinds of both windows were up, and the rays of a declining sun fell slantingly upon the picture, suffusing the lovely face with a rosy glow.

Jacqueline approached, slipped her hand upon her sister's arm, and stared at the familiar features.

After a long pause Prudence said gently—

"We shall miss her."

"Yes, indeed. How softly the sun kisses her pretty face!"

"I was going to suggest that we move the portrait into the inner room."

"A happy thought, Sister. She will seem nearer to us."

"We did our duty by her, Jacqueline?"

Jacqueline's delicate face indicated surprise, because there was the faintest inflection of interrogation in Prudence's voice.

"Yes, yes; it was a pleasure to make little sacrifices for her."

"I pray that she may be happy."

"That is certain."

"No, nothing is certain in this uncertain life, except its uncertainty."

"You speak, Sister, as if you had something on your mind."

"A disagreeable incident happened some three days ago. I intended not to tell you about it, but inasmuch as some mischief-maker may repeat the lie to you, it is perhaps as well that I should warn you."

"A lie?"

"A lie," repeated Prudence firmly. "A man came to me, a distant kinsman of ours, and something of a ne'er-do-well. I would rather not mention his name. He has spent some years in South Africa. Before I could stop him he made a most slanderous charge against Sir Rodney."

"Bless me! A slanderous charge?"

"He insinuated that Sir Rodney drank to excess."

"Impossible!"

"My answer to him! It *is* impossible that a man entrusted with vast responsibilities, a man who is part of the history of England, should drink to excess without such a vice becoming public knowledge."

"What did he say to that?"

"I shall give you his exact words: 'I do not charge Sir Rodney with getting drunk. I know for a fact that he is a secret drinker.'"

"Oh!" murmured Jacqueline, round-eyed with distress.

"I'll admit to you," continued Prudence, "that for one moment I was disconcerted, but I rallied my wits and dealt with him as he deserved. "You know for a fact," said I, "that Sir Rodney Brough drinks to excess in secret. Then you, sir, have been present upon such abominable occasions?"

"Sister, how clever of you! What did he reply?"

"He exhibited unmistakable confusion. He said that a friend had vouched for the truth of the story. Then I observed coldly: 'Your *fact*, sir, would appear to be mere hearsay after all. Are you prepared to bring this charge against Sir Rodney now? If so, I will fetch him.' My dear Jacqueline, he entreated me to let the matter rest. I could see that he was afraid of meeting Sir Rodney. That disposed of the slander, in my opinion."

"I quite agree."

"He went away, leaving me flustered. Slander is like a drop of milk in a tumbler of clear water. My mind became discoloured. To purge it I set myself the odious task of watching Sir Rodney at dinner. He drank Apollinaris water!"

"I have remarked how temperate he is."

"I have told you this, dear, to put you on your guard."

"I am obliged, Sister."

"We need never mention this again. I fear the tea will be overdrawn."

She turned to walk into the inner room; as she was passing through the folding doors she stood still and said tranquilly:

"Please pull down the blinds."

Jacqueline did so.

CHAPTER XI

WHICH RECORDS THE FLIGHT OF TIME

THE Sisters saw little of Rosetta after she returned from Touraine and before she sailed for India. Sir Rodney brought his bride to Charminster and spent three days at the Dower House, which passed quickly and pleasantly enough. Jacqueline may have thought that Rosetta was a shade too animated and gay; but she did not say so, even to Prudence. The bride laughed and chattered incessantly, apparently to the satisfaction and amusement of her husband. Prudence remarked that what passed as flippancy from the lips of a girl might be reckoned as wit in the mouth of a married woman.

"She is so young," she observed to Sir Rodney.

"That is not a disability in my eyes," replied the great man.

His "greatness" was rather oppressive to the Sisters, because it required an effort to take it for granted. Sir Rodney made no attempt whatever to demonstrate his quality. He listened attentively rather than graciously to Charminster small talk, saying little himself, and smiling grimly at well-meaning creatures like Mrs. Pogany and Mr. Lovibond. Laura Pogany came to tea with an autograph album tucked under a plump arm. She said gushingly:

"I have one precious page, Sir Rodney. Would it be asking too great a favour?" She opened the book. "Your signature here and a few lines?"

Upon the page were two famous signatures. A Queen of Song had written:

"A beautiful voice is the gift of God."

In striking contrast appeared the sentiment of a singer of comic opera.

"An ugly voice may be God's gift also."

Sir Rodney accepted a quill proffered by the eager girl. He inscribed his signature in breathless silence. Then he paused, gnawing the quill.

"Something of your own, *please*," whispered Laura, blushing with triumph.

Sir Rodney nodded and, like Alexander, seemed "to shake the spheres."

"God's greatest gift," he set down, "is——?"

He looked hard at the girl, who was pretty enough to deserve a glance.

"Is—what?" he asked.

Laura—her proud mother affirmed the fact afterwards—rose to a memorable occasion. She said with happy promptitude:

"Beauty, Sir Rodney."

"Woman," hazarded the parson.

Sir Rodney wrote: "*Silence.*"

This was dampening, but, as Prudence remarked, characteristic. Rosetta laughed easily.

"One for a chatterbox!" she exclaimed. "But, as you see, I have to talk for two!"

"Nobody else," cried Laura Pogany, "shall be allowed to write on that page. It is perfect."

Sir Rodney bowed.

To him and his wife were assigned the big bedroom and dressing-room facing Hog Lane, never occupied since the death of Lord Mauleverer. Rosetta laughed when she was ushered into it by Crump.

"Well, Crumpie, I insist upon one thing. Keep the blinds up while I'm here."

"Yes, Miss Rosetta—I mean, my lady."

"Think of me, if you can, as Miss Rosetta."

She flung up the lower sash of the big Georgian window and looked up and down the lane with an odd derisive smile upon her beautiful face.

"It's there," she said, almost to herself.

"What's there, my lady? Nothing unfit to be seen, I do hope."

"Nothing is unfit to be seen, Crumpie——"

"Good gracious, Miss!"

"To the nicely adjusted vision of the married woman. Don't you know what's there?"

Crump stared out of the window and shook her head, relieved to see no drunken men and no slatternly hussies.

"What *is* there, my lady? The pond?"

"The seamy side, Crumpie, which I was not allowed to look at when I was Miss Rosetta."

"And a very good thing, too, I say."

Rosetta shook her head.

"You are wrong, Crumpie, and if ever you should have charge of a little girl again, remember what I tell you now. It's a kind cruelty to interpose blinds between young eyes and the light which shines impartially upon good and evil. How can you recognise evil, if you are never allowed to see it?"

"I don't want to see it, my lady."

Rosetta kissed her affectionately.

"You are a dear, Crumpie; and you did your best for me, you old crustacean."

"Heavens, Miss, what's that?"

"Crustaceans dislike the light. Some sit in dark places, and some move sideways, and some hardly move at all."

"Well, I never! And me on the move from morning till night."

Rosetta kissed her again, and laughed.

Within six months, the sharp-eyed Crump noticed that the Sisters were growing—to use her adjective—more "pernicketty." Prudence was now fifty, Jacqueline being two years younger. The circle of their "likes" (to quote the handmaiden again) was diminishing, the universe held everything without it. A terror of the new and strange possessed them. They read aloud the old books, and exchanged the old platitudes. Dr. Pogany said to Mrs. Lovibond: "Positively, I dare not prescribe a new drug," a remark which moved the parson's wife to rare laughter, as she answered: "For my part I dare not prescribe a new novel." Each lady was "not at home" upon the afternoon preceding the departure of the Indian mail. In their fine Italian handwriting they wrote upon two sheets of the thinnest notepaper a summary of the week's happenings in Charminster. These letters had the supreme quality of atmosphere. Rosetta reading them was transported instantly to the sleepy old town which never changed. She could hear the church bells, behold the sluggish Char, and smell the odours of Hog Lane. Her heart seemed to beat more slowly, as she accompanied the Sisters up the High Street, into Vicarage and church, and other familiar places. But it beat faster when she read:

"I am rejoiced to tell you that Septimus Lovibond is in better health. His dear mother's prayers have been answered. He is now assistant editor of some newspaper, whose name has escaped my memory. Mrs. Lovibond assures me that he is earning a quite respectable salary, and contemplates writing a *Book!*"

Rosetta answered these carefully worded epistles with exemplary regularity, writing once a week to each sister alternately. Always the letters were read aloud, with running commentaries. Rosetta, in her turn, told the ladies exactly what she did, but never a word about what she felt. She described her big parties with amusing vividness, presenting the "funny side" of Indian life, the ridiculous jealousies, the insistence upon formalities, the side-splitting spectacle of solemn asses masquerading as lions.

"My syce," she wrote, "was kicked off my pony, which then ran away. This is how he reports the matter to me: 'Your Excellency, the pony you entrusted to me developed yesterday a domineering character, and left my custody. My God! how annoying!'"

Reading this aloud to Jacqueline, Prudence remarked—

"I trust that dear Rosetta adapts herself to these strange surroundings. I fancied—perhaps I was mistaken—that Sir Rodney was not too well pleased with her girlish habit of making fun of things and people."

"But he observed that her youth was no disability to him."

"True, true. Thank you for reminding me of that."

One day, Jacqueline, with audacity, said—

"It's rather odd, Sister, but the child has never suggested that we should pay her a visit."

Prudence wondered if dear Jacqueline was getting flighty.

"A visit?" she repeated, almost peevishly, "a voyage to India? If Rosetta were foolish enough to make such a mad suggestion, I should entreat her to consult her medical attendant."

"I know we couldn't go, Sister; but one likes to be asked."

"Rubbish! Now, what put this idea into your head?"

Jacqueline paused to collect her wits.

"Well, dear, I suppose it is natural for us to want to know how she is."

"How she is?"

"I read a sentence of Landor's the other day which impressed me: 'Death to the reflecting mind is less serious than matrimony.' I lie awake sometimes, Sister, wondering whether Rosetta is really happy."

"Of course she is happy. You are getting morbid, Jacqueline."

"Perhaps. I have not your nerves."

By this time, each sister was expecting news of an intimately domestic character. A hint concerning it roused them to quivering agitation.

"I am keeping rather quiet just now," wrote

Rosetta. "Rodney is behaving like a fussy old woman."

At this Prudence said, "I shall open a bottle of our father's old port to-night."

The next letter was more explicit:

"Rodney is absolutely certain that it will be a boy. Nothing else is possible. I did not tell you before, because I knew you would fret yourselves to fiddle-strings, but the Great Event will take place in two months."

"We must send out the christening robe," said Jacqueline.

This ancient and priceless garment had descended to the Sisters through their mother, a de Clancy. The garment had been fashioned most cunningly for Hugo de Clancy, who lost his life at Naseby. Fifty, at least, of the cavalier's descendants had worn this historic robe. It was despatched to India by the next mail, with a card bearing this inscription: "For the dear little son."

Ironic Fate decreed, of course, that it should be a daughter. She wore the christening robe of Sir Hugo de Clancy, and was christened Rose. The mother did not recover quickly from her confinement, although the Sisters remained in ignorance of this for some months. The disappointment, never once alleviated by speech, affected the ladies grievously, and they were fully prepared to make allowance for Sir Rodney, when Rosetta wrote as follows:

"Rodney has taken this hard. He made ridiculously certain that the baby must be a son. He had gone so far as to ask a friend to put the boy's name down for a club or two. He intended to enter *him* at his old house at Eton. He was to be called Rodney Mauleverer, and so forth. His first glimpse of the mite gave him a sort of suppressed fit. The creature was comically ugly, yellow as an orange, and puckered with wrinkles. I tried to soften him with a feeble joke, expressing my conviction that we were undoubtedly descended from monkeys. However, this little monkey has a pretty pair of eyes, dark blue, with long lashes, and her complexion is now quite what it ought to be. All the same, Rodney seldom looks at her. . . ."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Jacqueline.

"Pish!" said Prudence. "I predict that little Rose will be the apple of his eye."

"I would give my diamond ring to see her, Sister."

"We shall see her in due time. Babies, I confess, have never appealed to me."

Before Rose was short-coated the probability of the mother returning to England was mentioned in a letter, but, later, Rosetta herself dashed this rose-coloured hope (Jacqueline's joke) to the ground. "I do not wish to leave Rodney," she wrote, assigning no reasons. Prudence seized upon the obvious one, saying to Jacqueline with an inflection of defiance—

"There, my dear. I trust you are satisfied."

"Satisfied? Because Rosetta is not coming?"

"We could have had no greater proof of her love for her husband."

Jacqueline smiled happily. "Quite, quite. How stupid of me not to see that! Yes, yes, dear Rosetta! I am quite resigned now."

They sent out some toys, oblivious of the fact that Rose was for the moment interested in nothing except her bottle. Crump remarked to Cook that the ladies looked younger, and seemed to have developed curiosity concerning babies in Hog Lane, confining themselves, however, to patting and pinching the cheeks of the cleanest specimens. Crump discovered a copy of "Hints to Mothers," by Dr. Pye Chevasse, concealed beneath a pile of lavender-scented pocket-handkerchiefs in Jacqueline's room; and she remarked also that the candles were consumed much more quickly. The inference that Jacqueline, who hitherto had condemned reading in bed as one of the deadly sins, was breaking a self-imposed law, became too salient to be ignored. Prudence spent a morning in collecting many carefully mended little books, long covered with dust, such as "Line upon Line" and the "Peep of Day," with inscriptions in delicate flowing handwriting: "To my dear little Prudence, with Mamma's best love." She put them away in a drawer of her davenport, and with them, perhaps, a thousand dim and inarticulate thoughts not to be transcribed into words. Jacqueline, about the same time, ascended to the garret, and fished out of a prehistoric trunk a large doll, once her dearest possession, and still in a remarkable state of preservation. Rosetta had never been allowed to play with this beloved symbol of childhood, now destined for Rose, and presently to be equipped with a new and complete set of clothes.

Four years elapsed, and then Sir Rodney Brough returned to England as Lord Brough of Ord, the border town of the famous proconsul's birth. With him came Rosetta and Rose. The excitement of the Sisters was the greater, because no sign of it was visible to the good people of Charminster. The ladies went up to London to greet the distinguished travellers. Changes, as Prudence remarked, were to be expected, but the change in Rosetta was startling. She had become a great lady, *très grande dame*, so Jacqueline declared, with a manner charmingly gracious, but conveying the impression of a mature woman more ready to receive confidence than to bestow it. Her grim husband had become grimmer, and more silent. A cartoon appeared of him by Pellegrini, with the superscription: "The Iron Hand." Rosetta had lost colour and dimples, but a certain attenuation became her vastly well, revealing the finer lines of a beautiful face and figure. The sparkle of youth had vanished, leaving behind it shadows in the lovely eyes. An odd restlessness consumed her. The Broughs rented a house for the season, and Prudence observed with satisfaction that every detail of management was undertaken by its mistress.

In fine, Rosetta, the laughing, thoughtless, impulsive, affectionate child, had vanished.

In her place stood—Rose.

The meeting between the Aunts—for we must now so consider them—and niece took place in a bedroom at a hotel.

Rosetta went into another room, and reappeared, leading the child by the hand.

For an instant the ladies were confounded. For they beheld a tiny elf, with no trace of her mother's beauty, and exhibiting none of that milk and rose colouring so dear to elderly ladies of the mid-Victorian period.

"We call her Brownie," said Rosetta.

"She will always be Rose to us," said Jacqueline fervently.

The child kissed her Aunts demurely, without effusion, gazing steadily at their slightly flushed faces. She was, by odds, the most composed person present. When Jacqueline, abandoning all restraint, dropped upon her knees and flung her arms about the too thin little neck, murmuring: "So many kisses have been growing for you," the maid answered quaintly:

"Thank you, my dear."

Rosetta laughed. "She calls me 'my dear.' You have received a compliment."

Prudence ejaculated: "Bless my soul!"

A few minutes later Jacqueline produced her doll. A great moment this, and not without significance. Rose examined it with solemn interest.

"She talks," said Jacqueline. "Squeeze her and see."

Rose squeezed the accomplished doll in the wrong place, and asked gravely:

"What is your name?"

As Jacqueline was about to interrupt and explain, Rosetta enjoined silence. Rose stared hard at the doll, and continued, in a sharp voice: "Come, my fine dear, what is your name? It's so silly to be shy." She shook the speechless one impatiently, and then remarked reproachfully to Jacqueline: "She doesn't know her own name, the great silly."

"She is very young," murmured Jacqueline.

"She doesn't look very young."

"She can only say 'Mamma.' There!"

Rose's face expressed disappointment, and her little chin was curiously like her father's, as she said decidedly:

"I shall undress her, stick some pins into her, and put her into the corner. She ought to be thoroughly ashamed of herself."

Rosetta said, as if she were talking to an equal: "Why, Brownie, the Aunts will think that I stick pins into you."

Rose's eyes flashed.

"Nobody, not even His Ex., would dare to stick pins into me."

"*Quel enfant!*" murmured Jacqueline.

Alone with Jacqueline, Prudence stated her opinion that the child had, perhaps, been spoilt.

"Why not, Sister?"

"Why not! You approve?"

"I have thought sometimes that we were, perhaps, a little hard upon Rosetta, a thought too severe. We did not encourage artless confidence. We may have erred, upon the right side, of course."

"It is possible," said Prudence.

"The child is a clever darling—so original."

"Takes after her father."

"Do you think Rosetta will lend her to us?"

"She ought to have plenty of fresh air, and good, wholesome food. It is absurd, of course, but her complexion inspired in my mind the thought that she may have been allowed to eat curry."

After a discreet inquiry this very natural hypothesis was found to be incorrect.

When the Aunts returned to Charminster, Rose and her nurse accompanied them. Rosetta remained in London, busy with her new house and innumerable engagements. She promised to run down for a few days' visit at the first available moment. Then she asked abruptly:

"How are the Lovibonds? It will be delightful meeting her again."

Prudence looked at Jacqueline.

"Didn't we tell you? The Lovibonds are at Melchester. He is a Canon there, with a charming house in the Cathedral Close. Mrs. Lovibond is much aged. Our new Vicar, Mr. Easter, is a fine preacher, and a great acquisition to our little circle. His wife is very pleasant, and there are children."

"And—Septimus?"

"Poor Septimus! To be sure, he was a great friend of yours. He paid us a visit last year."

"You never mentioned that."

"Did we not? How remiss! Yes, indeed, he paid us his respects. The poor fellow has indifferent health. I failed to recognise him. He has done better than might be expected. I believe he owns a newspaper somewhere in the Antipodes. We remarked of him that he seemed antipodean."

"Quite," said Jacqueline.

"What do you mean by antipodean?"

"One dislikes to find fault with the son of a dear friend, but he struck us as having lived too long upon the other side of the world. Over there, no doubt, a certain roughness of speech and manner is not too severely criticised."

"Has he married?"

"My dear, surely you have not forgotten the shocking incident of the tiger?"

"I have not forgotten that."

"The poor fellow could hardly hope to find favour in the eyes of the right kind of wife, and his dear mother's son would not marry the wrong kind."

"He spent but two months in England."

"And his book?" asked Rosetta.

"His book? What book?"

"You wrote to me that he was writing a book. You used a capital 'B.'"

"What a memory you have! I had quite forgotten. I take it that he couldn't find a publisher."

Rosetta asked no more questions.

CHAPTER XII

BURIED ALIVE

THE aunts were unable to dissemble their delight when Rose, after careful inspection, pronounced the Dower House and its garden to be much to her liking. After tea, Jacqueline pointed out a fairy-ring upon the smooth lawn; Rose said gravely: "Yes, my dear, there are fairies in this garden. I see them. One is winking." A few minutes later she clapped hands at sight of the Char, exclaiming: "Oh, what lovely ships!"

"Ships?" repeated Jacqueline, wondering if a mud barge could be so described.

"Yes, ships, lovely ships. Look at their beautiful white sails!"

"To be sure," said Jacqueline. "And what are they carrying, my love?"

"Peacocks, parrots, and missionaries."

"Dear me! what eyes you have! Where are they sailing to?"

"To the pore, blind heathen. They eat the peacocks, and sometimes they eat the missionaries, but they prefer their wives."

"Bless me," said Jacqueline, quite flustered, "why?"

"His Ex."—she invariably alluded to her father thus—"says that the missionaries taste of tobacco, and the pore, blind heathen don't like that."

Jacqueline, rather glad that Prudence was not listening to the *risqué* conversation, said pleasantly: "We must have some nice talks, my darling."

Rose nodded.

"I'll talk to you, my fine dear, whenever you like."

Crump became her abject slave in five minutes. The child looked with interest at the ancient handmaiden, and asked gravely: "Are you an Aunt too?"

"Yes, Miss, I have three nieces and two nephews."

"Are the nieces like me?"

"Oh no, Miss."

"I 'spect they're pretty and good. I'm naughty and ugly."

Crump refused to believe this, but Rose insisted.

"Ask his Ex.," she said with finality. "He says I'm an ugly little devil, who needs smackin'."

Crump nearly replied: "Then he ought to be smacked himself," but, covered with confusion, she said hastily: "I'm sure, Miss, you're a sweet little angel to me."

"Thank you, my dear. How old are you?"

"Mercy on us! Ever so old."

"Yes, you're older than his Ex. I 'spect you know a lot. I like you fine."

Unconditional surrender on the part of Crump.

At dinner that night Jacqueline recited the incidents of the afternoon, concluding:

"She is highly imaginative, Sister."

"A sensitive plant, too; we must be very tender with her."

"Yes, indeed."

Thus it was understood, without disagreeably explicit words, that the discipline exercised in the case of Rosetta should be modified, and perhaps for the moment suspended, in the case of Rose. Let others explain, if they can, why Rose's quips appealed to the humour of the Aunts, whereas Rosetta's flights of fancy had filled the sisters with misgivings and acerbity.

In the morning Rose attended family prayers, a new experience, and was mightily impressed. She sat beside Jacqueline, but endeavoured to understudy the cook's devotional attitude and expression, joining with fervour in the Lord's Prayer. That night both the ladies ascended to the nursery to assist in the bathing of their niece, but when Prudence said softly: "And now, my love, will you repeat your prayers to me?" Rose answered decidedly:

"Oh no, my dear."

Prudence betrayed distress.

"You would prefer to say them to Aunt Jacqueline?"

"No," said Rose. "I am not going to pray in private any longer. I prefer to pray in public, like Cook."

And for the second time Jacqueline exclaimed: "*Mon Dieu! quel enfant!*"

At the end of a fortnight Rosetta rushed down for a week-end, and saw at a glance that Rose had become mistress of the Dower House. She saw also, with an odd pain at her heart, that the child was plumper and that colour was creeping into her thin cheeks. She asked herself: "Is this the effect of country air and food, or of unstinted love?" When Jacqueline put the inevitable question: "May we keep the little darling a little longer?" she replied quickly: "I notice a wonderful change in her. I dare not take her away from you yet."

So it was arranged that Rose should remain in Charminster for at least another month.

During this too brief visit the Sisters had an opportunity of noticing the curious relations between mother and daughter, curious, that is to say, for the time about which we are writing. The pair met as equals. Prudence commented upon this:

"You treat her like a sister of your own age."

"I want her confidence, and I have it. She tells me everything without reserve."

"But—she criticises you!"

"Her criticism is worth attention. I have taught her to use her eyes. She is my particular pal."

Prudence winced. "Pal" indicated a slightly vulgar intimacy.

"She adores you, Rosetta, but——"

"Yes?"

"We are rather distressed at her manner of speaking of her father. He seems, so far as we can judge, to have treated her rather roughly."

"Add 'B' to rough and you have him in one syllable."

"Oh!"

Rosetta ignored the exclamation. In a different voice, she continued:

"Rodney saw the Prime Minister yesterday.

His successor in South Africa has muddled things, undone Rodney's stitches. It is almost certain that he will be asked to go back there, with full powers, which he likes. He didn't have his own way altogether in India. This is between ourselves."

"My dear!"

"If he should be sent there on a sort of roving commission, we should have to do an immense amount of travelling, which is so bad for a child."

"Yes, yes, nothing could be worse."

Both ladies were quivering with excitement, foreseeing what was coming.

"Would you keep Rose with you for, say, the first year, till we get settled in a home of our own?"

"Nothing could give us more pleasure. It would be a sacred privilege. I think she would be safe with us."

"Safe—yes; that would reconcile me to much."

The sadness in her voice brought tears to Jacqueline's eyes. Prudence said nothing, wondering uneasily if it would be discreet to continue a painful subject. Rosetta solved what doubts she may have entertained by adding nervously:

"Rodney has not forgiven her for being a girl."

"Dear! dear!"

The ladies looked so shocked and distressed that Rosetta laughed.

"For that matter, he has not forgiven me for my part in the disappointing affair. Heaven knows I should have liked half a dozen sons. But—there it is! Having said so much, I may as well add that I am not sorry to separate father and daughter, even if I have to pay the bill. Let us talk of something else."

Upon the following Monday Rosetta returned to town. When she took leave of the Sisters, Prudence said, with emphasis: "I hope we shall have the pleasure of entertaining Rodney for a few days?"

Rosetta answered evasively:

"I never make plans for him. You will see me."

Nothing was said at the time, but the Sisters chewed in silence a bitter cud. After a few days, Prudence murmured tentatively: "You saw more of dear Rosetta than I did. Perhaps she spoke to you of—of herself?"

"Not a word."

"Um!"

Jacqueline hesitated, then she blurted out:

"Once, long ago, Mary Mauleverer spoke of Rodney as an immense unknown quantity."

"I remarked the phrase at the time."

"I wish we knew more about him. I fear, Sister, that he is a hard man."

"Rosetta would have despised a soft man."

"True; you are always just, Sister."

"The 'Iron Hand' has accomplished much for England."

"I quite agree; but one would like—without displaying impertinent curiosity—to find out what he has accomplished for our sister."

"He has made her a great lady, for one thing. I am of opinion, my dear Jacqueline, that it hardly becomes us to pry into this matter. For the rest, we must acquiesce humbly in the rulings of Providence, Who chastens those whom He loves best.

Speaking for myself, I refuse to look for evil. Rodney has not treated us with quite the consideration that I expected."

"I care nothing about that. I want to know if he is kind to Rosetta."

"Without positive knowledge, it is unjust even to hint that he is not."

"I suppose you are right."

Rosetta paid other flying visits to Charminster, but she came alone. Before the season had reached its zenith the ladies understood that Rose would not be taken from them during that summer; and already the papers were clamouring for a MAN to be despatched to South Africa. The Sisters read aloud the leaders in *The Times* with gusto. Public approval of Rosetta's husband served to qualify judgment. A great administrator must not be appraised by ordinary rule of thumb. The perusal of Macaulay's essays upon Clive and Warren Hastings fortified this conclusion. Dominating everything was the immeasurable delight and privilege of possessing Rose.

In late September the Broughs sailed to South Africa, where so many reputations have been made and lost. Both political parties acclaimed the appointment of the right man, possibly the only Englishman alive who could deal with Kruger adequately. Lord Brough, as *The Times* pointed out, did not go to Africa as a Lord High Commissioner, or Lord High Anything Else. He was to visit a troublous country in a private capacity, to report, without fear or favour, upon things as they were. Notwithstanding, a paper with a larger circulation than *The Times* dubbed him *Dictator*. He was spoken of as Cæsar, and Mauleverer told everybody that he had been the first so to call him.

By an odd coincidence, within a month of Rosetta's departure the ladies at the Dower House received a letter from Melchester. Mrs. Lovibond wrote:

"My Septimus has left Australia. He is on his way to Cape Town, having identified himself with some large mining interests. From what he tells us, it would seem that he has had at last a slice of luck. Some shares which he took as security for a bad debt have proved very valuable. He sent his father a cheque for a thousand pounds, which gave us great pleasure, the more because we were able to return it. . . ."

"He may meet Rosetta," said Jacqueline.

Prudence answered tranquilly:

"It is possible. Rosetta will be glad to see her old friend. Rodney may be able to help him."

"Apparently he no longer needs help."

"That's as may be. We must write very warmly to Mrs. Lovibond. Rosetta will find Septimus rather a rough diamond."

"She may not meet him at all. I rather hope she will not."

"Do you mean anything by that?"

"Why should I mean anything? Time was when Rosetta showed an odd partiality for rough diamonds. She has changed. Fine stones in a fine setting appeal to her now."

"That is my opinion also."

We are not much concerned with the events of the year that followed. Life at the Dower House flowed on as placidly as the river Char, as slowly as the barges upon the surface of that sluggish stream. If the Aunts were conscious of any change, it was assuredly one for the better. They felt and looked younger, although it was remarked that their zeal in district-visiting and in attendance at meetings of the S.P.G. and G.F.S. had perceptibly diminished. They remained in their house and garden, increasingly loath to venture abroad.

"It is so agreeable here,' Jacqueline would murmur; "our lines are cast in pleasant places."

They were enjoying that Indian summer which comes to many spinsters, notably those who have learnt to travel along lines not only pleasant in themselves but of least resistance. Charminster spoke of the ladies reverentially, calling the attention of the passing stranger to the mellow tone of the old house, and the soft radiance which seemed to exude from the half vitreous bricks. The tradesmen in the High Street bowed even more obsequiously than of yore when the Misses Mauleverer "honoured" them with their "esteemed patronage." The ladies had adopted lavender and grey as their only wear of colour. Rose represented an increase of income of 200*l.*, which encouraged, and, indeed, exacted, a nicer taste in personal adornment, because the dear child was so very critical. The conspiracy to "spare" such fine specimens of delicate porcelain now included the Easters, who had taken the place of the Lovibonds at the Vicarage and also in the hearts of the ladies. Slander never reached the Dower House, gossip but rarely.

Many offerings reached the Dower House from near and far. Mauleverer might send a lordly salmon from Tweed, or a haunch of venison from the Court; oblations even more appreciated, and involving less dislocation of a modest establishment, took the form of early asparagus, or May peas from the garden of a humble neighbour, or a posy of snowdrops or violets.

Sometimes Jacqueline would exclaim in astonishment: "I don't know why people are so kind to us. Heaven knows we have done little enough for them."

It would take a wiser person than Jacqueline (or the present scribe) to answer this ingenuous question. In such towns as Charminster, before the scream of the motor-car was heard in the land, the "quality" exercised, whether passively or actively, an extraordinary and indescribable power of inspiring respect not only for themselves, but for what they represented. The Misses Mauleverer were "Honourable" in a sense hardly to be understood by the rising generation. Possibly the last flicker of a dying feudal system illuminated, not the lords who set the match to it, but the ladies, secluded in their bowers, wringing protesting hands, and endeavouring to quench the flames with unavailing tears.

Let it be noted, in connection with the unhappy event to be recorded, that the Misses Mauleverer were the only real "quality" in Charminster, respected as such by the most blatant Radicals in Hog Lane. Kipling's line, "The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skin," was not yet written. Nobody in Charminster dared to maintain that the admirable Crump was a sister under her skin to Prudence Mauleverer. Even Dr. Pogany, who lowered his voice when he spoke to the Sisters, would have said bluffly: "My wife, a good soul, God bless her! but pottery, work-a-day pottery, my dear Sir. What? Miss Jacqueline Mauleverer? Finest Sévres, of the unmistakable soft paste!"

Catastrophe fell out of the blue skies in the middle of September.

Dr. Pogany met the Rev. Thomas Easter in Charminster High Street. Mr. Easter was a tall, thin man, not so particular in matters of dress and deportment as his predecessor. He presented to the eyes of his parishioners a scholar's stoop, and something of your true scholar's hesitation, as if he were loath to accept with enthusiasm a particular rendering of an isolated text. Mr. Lovibond, in the pulpit and out of it, was nothing if not cocksure, which endeared him to the weaker brethren. Dr. Pogany, it may be remembered, was condemned by Septimus for not using a microscope. The good fellow, a rough-and-ready practitioner of the old school, preferred to look at tongues rather than microbes.

"You have heard this appalling news, Easter?"

"I have not."

"Lady Brough has bolted with Septimus Lovibond."

"God help her sisters!"

"Amen," said Pogany with feeling. He led the Vicar aside, and added details—

"Lord Brough is a brute—a capable brute, I grant you, a tamer of wild beasts and all that, and as such an asset to the Empire. I am assured on unimpeachable authority that he drinks in secret.

Between ourselves, I guessed as much when I saw him. We have hardly dared to breathe it here. I am sure he is cruel, and there have been stories about that, too. Long ago there was something more than a flirtation between young Lovibond, a gallant lad, and Miss Rosetta. The few held their tongues. As you know, he was badly mauled by a tiger. We all thought that he was down and out, not a kick left in him. But it seems that he recovered. And last year he went to South Africa. The rest we can guess."

"It is not in the papers."

"It will be kept out of the papers. Trust Downing Street for that. My informant is Mrs. Lovibond, the mother."

The Vicar removed his hat and wiped his forehead. He had the air of a man trying to unravel a doubtful passage in the classics.

"What are we going to do?" asked Pogany. "Try to hush it up?"

"Can it be hushed up?"

"How can I tell? One may try, that's all. I have told nobody but you. I shall not tell Mrs. Pogany. For the moment, perhaps, it will be wise to mark time. Let us see how *they* take it."

"They have the child."

"Mercifully, they have the child."

"I must think it over," said the Vicar, as he went on his way.

That afternoon Mrs. Easter said to her husband:

"I have just heard that Lady Brough is dead."

"Good Heavens! dead?"

"I know nothing but this. The blinds are down upon both sides of the Dower House, and deepest mourning has been already ordered. Crump brought the news here. Lord Brough wrote to say that his wife was dead, but, so far as I can gather, sent no details."

"Dead!" repeated the Vicar.

"I suppose you ought to go there?"

The Vicar nodded absently. He felt reasonably sure that there had been a mistake. Poor women, poor unhappy woman! Dead, yes, in almost every sense of the word except the generally accepted one.

He drank a cup of tea and walked to the Dower House. At the front door, Crump said that she thought Miss Mauleverer would like to see him. He was ushered into the darkened drawing-room, and sat down opposite to the portrait of the woman who was dead. Presently, Prudence came in, very pale but composed. She carried a letter in her hand.

"This is all we have," she said. Her voice broke as she added: "God knows it is enough."

The Vicar read the letter.

"DEAR PRUDENCE,

"It is not possible for me to soften a blow which has fallen as suddenly upon me as it will upon you and Jacqueline. Everything which might be said by a man other than what I am is comprised in three words. *Rosetta is dead.* I ask for no sympathy. It would hurt me to receive it; I can believe that it would hurt you to offer it. *Rosetta is dead.* My work will engross me; and I shall put the past behind me, as I have always done. I am sending to you the pearl necklace which you gave to your sister, and with it the jewels she received from me. Put them into the bank for the child. Let her remain in your care till I return to England.

"Do not answer this.

"Yours sincerely,
"BROUGH."

The Vicar, of course, grasped the truth at once. To gain time he muttered, as he returned the letter:

"A hard man, I fear."

"Yes; a hard man, but he makes it easy for us." As she saw that he did not quite understand, she added, with dignity: "Lord Brough did not treat my sister and myself with consideration. We should find it difficult to offer him the sympathy he doesn't want. It is cruel not to send details, but my sister and I have never cared much for details. It is enough to know that Rosetta is dead. She, also, was reserved, even to us. It would be her wish, I believe, that we should obey this hard man, as she obeyed him. I shall not answer this letter, and I shall try to make the child understand that God in His goodness has received an unhappy woman into His everlasting Peace."

The Vicar murmured a few phrases of condolence and fled. To his wife, after full explanations, he said abjectly:

"My courage oozed from me. I couldn't tell her."

"My dear, I don't blame you. Lord Mauleverer must explain. But what are we to do? Leave cards? Write? Call? Was there ever such an impossible situation?"

The Vicar considered it with detachment.

"The news of Lady Brough's death is all over the town. Many people will call, but the Sisters will see none of them. When the truth leaks out, they will probably let the Dower House and go abroad for a year. Anyway, from my knowledge of them, I feel sure that they will regard their unhappy sister as dead."

Through the rest of the week Charminster wondered what the Sisters would do, for, of course, the facts became known. The town talked of nothing else. Many persons had left cards believing that Lady Brough was really dead and buried. The question of the hour was: "Would the ladies leave Charminster altogether?" There had been no countermanding of the mourning; that much was certain. The dresses were to be delivered not later than eight o'clock on Saturday night. Was it to be inferred that the Sisters intended to go to church, and brave the gaze of the multitude? Mrs. Pogany confessed tearfully: "I should not have courage enough for that," and the Doctor remarked gruffly: "You were not born a Mauleverer."

Upon Sunday morning the parish church was inconveniently crowded. Mrs. Easter, marshalling her Sunday-school scholars, addressed them nervously: "If the ladies from the Dower House should attend Divine Service, I am sure that you will all be polite enough not to stare at them."

They came!

In deep mourning, with the child walking between them, the ladies walked to the church and into their own pew. Mrs. Pogany wept. She remarked afterwards:

"Miss Mauleverer lifted her veil; I knew then how Marie Antoinette looked when she mounted the scaffold."

This was said at tea-time, when many friends had "dropped" in to discuss a fresh point :—

"Was this public appearance in deep mourning to be taken as a message from the ladies to all Charminster? Knowing by this time, as they must, that Lady Brough was not dead, had they chosen this method of signifying that henceforward she was to be reckoned as dead?"

Upon the Monday morning three papers contained a notice of Lady Brough's death. This was conclusive. The unhappy lady had reaped the wages of sin. She had run away to her death. How, and when, and where, remained darkest mystery.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PASSING OF ROSETTA

UPON the Wednesday, when Prudence Mauleverer received from Lord Brough the letter which caused her to believe that Rosetta was dead, she wrote to the Head of the Family, apprising him of the sad news. The letter was sent to the Court, but, unfortunately, Mauleverer and his wife were away. According to instructions, all letters were forwarded to Mauleverer House, where he expected to pass a few hours after a night journey from Scotland. Unfortunately, also, he was delayed in Scotland, and did not reach London till Monday morning. In the remote lodge in Inverness, where he had been stalking, no news of the elopement had reached him, but at Perth station on Sunday the story was poured into his horrified ears by an acquaintance.

" I don't believe a word of it," he had exclaimed.

" Fact, I assure you. The talk of all the clubs. She bolted with a mining fellow called Loveband or Lovebond, whom nobody has ever seen or heard of."

Upon arrival at their town house, the Mauleverers lunched upon what could be provided. The establishment was in the country. After luncheon Maulever opened his letters.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "the Sisters believe that poor Rosetta is dead!"

"Impossible," said Mary.

After she had read the letter, she admitted that it was so. Husband and wife stared at each other, confounded. Then they made another discovery, which filled them with further dismay. The letter had been written upon a Wednesday, and it was now Monday.

"Prudence thought that we were at the Court," said Mary. "This complicates matters, unless someone else has already told them the truth. From my knowledge of Charminster that is unlikely. The townspeople would assume, not unnaturally, that such a disagreeable duty was ours, and ours alone."

"That parson there."

"A comparative stranger."

"But—Good Lord!—they will be in mourning! This is awful; the more so because it trenches on the ridiculous. And now we don't know where we are. I was never so upset in my life. London is simply buzzing with the scandal. They must know."

"Let us hope so."

None of their children were with them. As they were still staring at each other, a servant came in, and said that Mr. Easter had called earlier in the day, and would call again at three.

"That's the first ray of light," groaned the Head of the Family.

They went on talking at random, as people do when sensible that anything is preferable to silence.

Before many minutes had elapsed the servant, who happened to be a new-comer, came in again, and said that a lady wished to see Lord Mauleverer.

"A lady? Surely she gave you her name?"

"No, my lord; she gave me this."

He presented a sealed note.

"Can you see me for a few minutes on a matter of most urgent importance?

"ROSETTA."

"Show the lady in. When Mr. Easter calls, let me know."

"Very good, my lord."

"Rosetta is here. Will you go, Mary, or stay?"

"I shall stay."

Rosetta came in, heavily veiled. She lifted her veil as the door closed behind the servant. Her face was very pale, but she looked well, and perfectly composed. Mary, without a word of greeting, kissed her. Mauleverer held out his hand. He was the first to break the silence.

"My poor dear," he groaned, "you've made a sad mess of it, but dammy, I can't throw stones at you."

"Nor can I," said Mary.

"You are kinsmen indeed," said Rosetta calmly, "but kind as you both are, you mustn't think that I came here to ask for sympathy or to grovel. I have self-respect enough to keep out of this house. Have you seen this morning's *Times?*"

"Glanced at it, that's all."

"My obituary notice is in it."

"What! This is the last straw."

"It's in other papers."

"Prudence must have inserted it."

"But—why?"

"She believes you to be dead."

"Septimus and I are in London. We travelled under assumed names by the steamer which brought the news to England. I spent most of the time in my cabin, and nobody guessed who I was. We landed on Tuesday. On Tuesday night Septimus saw his mother, who wrote to Dr. Pogany. I don't know whether she said in so many words that she wished him to tell my sisters, but she reckoned on his doing so. And now they think I'm dead."

"We are expecting the Vicar of Charminster in a few minutes. He will explain. Perhaps you would rather not meet him."

"I wish to meet him. It is possible that Rodney inserted that notice. I am dead to him, I know. He was drinking heavily when I ran away."

The servant opened the door.

"Mr. Easter has called, my lord."

"We will see Mr. Easter here."

Mauleverer, of course, had given the Charminster living to Easter, but he hardly knew him. He said heartily: "You are the one man in England I particularly wished to see. You know Lady Mauleverer, I think. Have you met Lady Brough?"

The parson was staggered, but he bowed gravely to both ladies.

Mauleverer continued in his easy manner:

"Lady Brough, who landed in England last Tuesday, has just read her obituary notice in *The Times*. Is it possible that my cousins at the Dower House believe her to be dead?"

"I believe so."

"But, bless my soul! don't you *know?*"

"That is why I am here. Charminster knows," he hesitated, with a side glance at the beautiful woman who stood near him, perfectly calm and dignified, more so indeed than the mistress of the house; "Charminster knows," he continued hastily, "what——"

"Everybody knows," said Lady Brough.

"Your sisters appeared at church yesterday in deepest mourning. The little girl was with them, in mourning also."

At this Rosetta winced.

"Heavens on earth!" exclaimed Mauleverer.

"I may be partly to blame. Dr. Pogany had the news direct from Mrs. Lovibond. He told me. We—I—thought it could be hushed up."

"Hushed up?"

"For the moment only. Our common wish was to consider the ladies. That same afternoon I heard that Lady Brough was dead, and that the blinds were down upon both sides of the house."

Rosetta smiled faintly.

"I hurried to the Dower House. I saw Miss Mauleverer. She showed me a letter from Lord Brough. I happen to have a retentive memory. I can repeat the letter *verbatim*."

"Please do so."

He did so.

"The brute!" exclaimed Mauleverer.

"Are we not wandering from the more important matter?" asked Rosetta.

"Why did you not tell the truth to Miss Mauleverer?" asked Mary.

"That is not easy to answer. Would that I had! But their position amongst us is unique, mediæval in a sense. We have regarded them as laid away in lavender. Always they have been spared."

"Always," repeated Rosetta.

"I—well, call me a coward—I couldn't speak then. And afterwards we—my wife and I—thought that you would do it."

He looked at Mary Mauleverer.

"We have been away. We heard nothing till this morning, nothing at all. My husband and I understand your position. We do not blame you."

"It is kind of you to say that, but I blame myself."

Mauleverer interrupted with a groan.

"We mustn't whine over spilt milk. What shall we do now?"

"It is quite possible that the ladies do know. Charminster is split into two camps; one believes Lady Brough to be dead, the other suggests that the wearing of mourning is an intimation to the world that her sisters regard her as dead to them."

"They will so regard me," said Rosetta.

"As Christians, Lady Brough, can they so regard you?"

"There are Christians and Christians, Mr. Easter. My sisters would make great sacrifices, if such were needed, to provide for me, but from my knowledge of them I fear that they would decline to see me. They have always refused to look at anything or anybody likely to offend their sensibilities."

"We're not getting much forrarder," said Mauleverer.

"I must tell them the truth," said Mary.

"Wait!" said Rosetta. She paused for an instant; then she spoke quickly, with a feeling and passion hitherto suppressed. "Is there any reason why I should not remain dead? Even before you, Mr. Easter, I must say frankly that my only regret is that I did not leave Lord Brough sooner. Mr. Lovibond and I have made our plans. We shall begin life again under an assumed name. The world will not question this," she tapped *The Times*, "and I shall let Lord Brough know what has happened. I am dead to him, and I am dead to my sisters, and to nearly all of my friends. To open my sisters' eyes would cause unnecessary pain. It would be a consolation to me to think that they believed me to be dead, and were thinking kindly of me, and speaking of me to my child as a good woman. The truth would taint my poor little Rose, take the bloom from her. I—I jump at this chance."

"But if they should find out?"

"How can they find out? The world will know that I left my husband, and thanks to this," she tapped the paper again, "it will believe that I died immediately afterwards. People may hint at horrors, but nobody will know that I am alive, except the persons in this room, and the Lovibonds."

"I protest against it," said Mauleverer.

"I protest also," echoed the parson.

Mary remained silent.

"I shall do it," said Rosetta.

"You are not just to your sisters," said Mary slowly. "You take for granted that they would refuse to see you, and cast you out of their lives. I think more kindly of them."

"They are good women," Rosetta answered. "And they devoted themselves to me, as they are devoting themselves now to my child, but I shall never forget the story of Hester Prynne."

"Hester Prynne?" repeated Mauleverer. "Who's Hester Prynne?"

"Hester Prynne broke the seventh Commandment, with greater excuse for doing so than I. I once asked Prudence if she would speak to Hester Prynne if she, or her like, were walking about Charminster. She said 'No,' and she meant it. To them," Rosetta concluded solemnly, "I am indeed—dead!"

Nobody spoke.

"I might come to life again," continued Rosetta drearily, "after Lord Brough's death. He is not likely to live many years. He will not marry again, and he will not divorce me. If the day dawns when I can return to Charminster as Mr. Lovibond's wife, I might wish to do so. Time is kind to sinners, particularly prosperous sinners. I entreat you to leave my sisters and me in peace."

Mary answered her, not in words only. She crossed the room, and took Rosetta's hand, holding it tightly between her own.

"Let me see the Sisters," she said softly. "If it is as you say, if their hearts are indeed closed to you, then I will be a party to this fraud."

"But how will you find out?" exclaimed her husband.

"You can trust me for that."

The parson and Mary travelled down to Charminster together, parting company at the station, some three miles from the town. The railroad had been planned to run through Charminster, but the townspeople were unanimous in burking this scheme. The day came when they bitterly regretted the sentiment which had side-tracked a pretty place not without attractions to tourists. This paragraph in the town's history explains the reactionary side of its inhabitants. Moreover, the Mauleverer family had taken an active part in keeping the railroad at bay, because, as plotted on the first maps, it meandered along the Char and through the pretty garden of the Dower House.

The ladies noticed at once that Mary was not in mourning, a trifling matter, and easily explained, no doubt; still, it had been a custom for the ladies of the family not to show themselves abroad after the death of a near relation till they were attired suitably.

" How kind of you to come ! " said Prudence.

Mary glanced at each in turn, trying to peer beneath the crust of propriety and deportment. She saw that Jacqueline's eyes were inflamed with much weeping, and that Prudence was slightly tremulous. Before they had uttered a syllable, Mary realised that the Sisters believed Rosetta to be dead.

She admitted afterwards that her impressions were as likely to be wrong as right, but at the time she felt sure that Rosetta's sudden death, grievous shock as it had been, was tempered by the reflection that worse might have happened. Torquemada, with his hideous machinery, might have failed to extort the plain truth from the ladies, but Mary was convinced that each feared instinctively what their world conspired to keep from them—the disastrous nature of Rosetta's marriage. Realising this, must they not have trembled with anxiety lest a high-strung, impulsive creature, none too strong of will, and ever impatient of restraint, might cut loose from intolerable fetters? The first few words confirmed this impression. Prudence said guardedly: "Rosetta never looked *quite* herself after her marriage."

"Did you insert the obituary notices?"

"Yes."

"Have you written to Lord Brough?"

"No."

Then the letter was shown. When Mary had read it, Prudence said with agitation:

"We shall obey him. Jacqueline and I would like to have details, but we are too proud to ask for them. To write to a consul or some local authority would provoke gossip. We may take it for granted that everything humanly possible was done. She is dead—and buried. Happily, we have no sentiment about graves. Lord Brough will have attended to that. We are indescribably hurt and distressed, but we cannot write to anybody."

Jacqueline murmured nervously: "We have wondered whether Rosetta was entirely happy with this hard man?"

"She was not," said Mary firmly.

Immediately Jacqueline conveyed the impression of a frightened rabbit about to scurry into the nearest burrow.

Mary continued with emphasis: "Lord Brough was a brute to her."

Prudence held up a shaking hand. "My dear Mary, ought we to go into that now?"

"Will it serve any good end?" faltered Jacqueline.

"I am going into it, deeply, for all our sakes. He was, I repeat, a brute. He bullied her in many ways. He treated the child with a cynical roughness and indifference which must have hurt the mother cruelly. She worshipped that child, and she left her with you because she was frightened out of her wits, terrified that her husband would go on striking her through the child."

"Rosetta told you this?"

"Not a word; she is a Mauleverer."

Prudence moistened her dry lips. "Then what you repeat is hearsay?"

Mary nearly lost her temper. The sight of these two excellent women, side by side on a sofa, with hands meekly crossed upon their laps, with eyes downcast, and half veiled by heavy lids, shaking with fear, and yet obstinately determined to see nothing except the flowers on the carpet, would have been even more exasperating had it not been so pathetic.

"Hearsay—yes. I had it from one of the *aides-de-camp*, who resigned because he couldn't stand it. He happens to be a cousin of mine, and a dear friend. You have my word for it that he is incapable of spreading a scandal or of exaggerating. I am going to tell you exactly what he told me."

The sisters shivered.

"It began after the birth of the baby. Rosetta had a hard confinement. She nearly died. Did you know that?"

"No."

"There were complications which made it probable that she would never have another child. I am not blaming you, but it is unfortunate that she had not been taught what she ought to have known—how to take care of herself, how to make preparation for motherhood, knowledge of vital importance to every woman and to the next generation."

The ladies blushed. Prudence drew herself up, rigid and speechless with consternation; Jacqueline wriggled. The thought in both their minds was, "We must be perfectly calm; this woman is half American." Mary continued:

"For years Lord Brough has drunk to excess. I found that out after the marriage. Would to Heaven I had been given a hint of it before. He appeared singularly temperate, but he had bouts, fits of mad indulgence, carefully hidden from everybody. And the world is so charitable to sinners in high places." She saw that the Sisters were now white and trembling, so she added in a gentler voice: "I would spare you this, if I could. I know that you would have broken off the match at the last moment had you suspected for an instant that anything was wrong."

"How could he do his work?"

"These fits attacked him seldom, but I understand that of late they have increased in frequency and intensity. Brandy will kill him. He was horribly cruel to Rosetta when it became certain that the one thing he wanted, a son, would be denied to him. I have every reason to believe that he was unfaithful to her."

Jacqueline began to cry. In a different voice, Mary went on:

"It is a wonder to me that she remained above suspicion."

"Suspicion?" repeated Prudence.

"Be sure that she was sorely tempted."

Prudence said, frigidly:

"Really, Mary, this is going too far."

"I am going, once and for all, to the bitter end. Rosetta was a passionate creature, capable of inspiring and returning a great love. I studied her character with absorbing interest during the two seasons she spent with us. She was capable of making any sacrifice for those she loved. But, essentially, she was weak of will, easily dominated. She came into intimate contact with the best men in India."

"Surely you do not insinuate that the *best* men would have tempted a young wife from her plain duty to her husband and her sex. You surprise me, Mary."

"Men are men. As some French writer has said: 'We choose our friends, but love imposes itself.' If Rosetta had yielded to temptation, if, in a moment of weakness, distracted by misery and loneliness, she had left her brute of a husband with a man more worthy of her, what would you have said?"

Prudence rose with dignity, looking first at the portrait of Rosetta, and then fixing her pale blue eyes upon Mary's face. She stood very erect, as a queen might stand when imposing a sentence beyond appeal. Involuntarily, Mary did homage to certain royal qualities which expressed themselves in her voice, her bearing, and the austere lines of her delicately modelled face. None beholding her could doubt that this was a woman of exquisite refinement, of a purity unassailable, just, according to her lights, unselfish, and capable of unswerving devotion to her ideals and convictions.

"I will answer that question, Mary Mauleverer, although it is irrelevant and unseemly. To me, it is little short of an outrage that you should ask it. And yet, from my knowledge of you, I acquit you of any desire to lacerate our most sacred feelings. Rosetta is dead, but she still lives for us, and she will live again for her child, our dearest possession, without which life would be empty indeed. We made mistakes in our upbringing of Rosetta, but if, in spite of the shocking conditions you have revealed to us, she was able, under God's mercy, to confront them steadfastly and valiantly, why then our upbringing of her, with its many errors, stands justified before God and man. Had it been otherwise, had she betrayed our belief in her purity, had she violated the solemn pledges of the marriage sacrament, why then," her voice broke, "of all women in the world we should be the most desolate and wretched."

"But," Mary hardly spoke above a whisper, "you would have forgiven her?"

"Forgiven her! What do you mean by forgiveness? The word is shamefully abused. Is it for us to forgive such offences? That lies with God alone. You press me hard, Mary; I am at a loss to understand you, but the tears in your eyes plead for you. I cannot answer you, because it is impossible for me to think of our dear Rosetta as—

as one of the shameless throng. Were she of them she would become dead to us in a sense I cannot explain—really dead, not a dear part of us as she is to-day, not a cherished memory to be enshrined for ever, but a strange, unknown woman so far removed from us as to be invisible."

Mary went to the window.

When she turned the Sisters were standing together, gazing at the sweet face which smiled down so reassuringly upon them.

THE BOOK OF ROSE

CHAPTER I

PUERILIA

For some weeks after the "passing" of Rosetta the Aunts slept ill. Speculation ran amok concerning the right administration of a sacred charge. Rose was a darling, of course, but *so* different from other little girls whom the ladies had met in fiction and real life. Prudence remarked that the child's behaviour when she first learned of her dear mother's death was quite extraordinary. Rose adored Rosetta, but no passion of weeping assailed her when the Aunts, as tenderly as possible, broke the dreadful news.

Jacqueline whispered:

"God wanted her, my love."

Rose considered this attentively.

"Does He want her more than I do?"

"It was His will that she should go to Him."

"Why didn't He take His Ex.?"

Jacqueline thought: "Why, indeed?" but she contented herself with hugging the thin little body and stroking the pale little face. Rose moped for many days, asking no questions and displaying no appetite for food. Gradually she became herself; but, a week later, Prudence discovered her alone in the inner drawing-room, staring hungrily at the portrait in pastel. Abruptly she said to her aunt:

"She died because she was good. I'm glad that I'm so naughty."

"But you're not naughty!"

"I feel naughty. When I'm alone I say—damn!"

Prudence exhibited no acerbity; for the moment words failed her. Rose continued calmly:

"When His Ex. is angry he say 'Damn' and 'God-damn!'"

"You must promise me that you will never use those dreadful words. It would grieve her"—Prudence pointed a thin shaking finger at the portrait.

"I 'spect it would," Rose replied gravely, but she made no pledges, murmuring half to herself: "If I'm too good I shall die before I'm growed up."

Her vivid imagination distressed the poor ladies, who had been hard upon Rosetta because they themselves were utterly lacking in this divine gift. They became alarmed when they found out that Rose had created for herself an invisible playmate named Miss Marguerite. In a cherished pocket the child carried an old pack of cards, and with these she played endless games of "Old maid" and "Beggar my neighbour" but always with Miss Marguerite. One day Jacqueline asked her, as Rose was shuffling the cards for a fresh deal:

"Who won that last game?"

"Miss Marguerite; but you know *she cheats!*"

"It's uncanny," said Jacqueline to Prudence. "We must deal with her very tenderly."

The child created other invisible persons, with whom she carried on interminable conversations. A certain Mrs. Brockenhurst lived in the cottage occupied by Mrs. Veal. She was a sad invalid, who took her breakfast in bed, and disliked fat. Rose would say mournfully to Jacqueline, who was showing surprising aptitudes for this new game:

"Pore Mrs. Brockenhurst is no better this morning. I shall ask Dr. Pogany to call."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She's in bed, rather regretting the birth of twins!"

In desperation Jacqueline demanded of Prudence:

"Where does she get these ideas and words from? 'Rather regretting!' Did you ever hear the like?"

"In India, she may have overheard these astonishing expressions. Do you think we ought to correct her?"

"Oh no," said Jacqueline. "I am terrified of losing her confidence. She might confine her attention entirely to Miss Marguerite and that bothering Mrs. Brokenhurst."

To be candid, Aunt Jacqueline was slightly jealous of Mrs. Brockenhurst, who absorbed indeed too much of Rose's attention. Rose said:

"She's so silly about those babies—girls, too. I was asked to the christenin', but I didn't go. Do you blame me?"

"Far from it," replied Jacqueline.

A year after her mother's "passing," the child had an exciting adventure, something which she never forgot. It must be remembered that she had not seen Rosetta for more than two years.

And the Rosetta she had known was now lost to memory, because the Rosetta of the picture had usurped her place. Tongues of angels could not have persuaded Rose that the mother of her dreams was other than a laughing girl, with sparkling eyes, and always dressed in sprigged muslin, with a knot of blue riband at her throat.

The adventure took place in late August at Bognor. Rose and her nurse were on the beach. The Aunts were shopping. Presently a tall lady, wearing blue spectacles and a thick veil, came and sat down not far from the child. Rose noticed particularly the blue spectacles, and began to weave a romance concerning them. The nurse, a good woman of Charminster, engaged a few months previously, saw with satisfaction that the lady—a real lady—was much interested in Rose. Within a minute or two, Rosetta—for it was she—approached the nurse, and said in a low, soft voice:

"Who is that little girl?"

"Lord Brough's daughter, Madam."

"Is it possible? I once knew Lord Brough. May I speak to his little daughter?"

"I'm sure, Madam, that the ladies would have no objection. May I inquire your name, Madam?"

"Mrs. Newman. I am leaving Bognor this afternoon."

"Come here, Miss Rose, if you please."

Rose approached with caution.

"This lady knows your papa."

"You know His Ex.? Do you like him? I never did."

"Miss Rose! Aren't you forgetting yourself?"

"I don't forget His Ex. Once he held both my hands, and told me to pull. When I did, he let go, and I went bang on the back of my head. We never got on after that."

"Miss Rose, please be good! I don't know what Mrs. Newman will think of you."

"Will you shake hands?" asked Rosetta, disguising her voice.

"All right, but I don't kiss. Why do you want to talk to me?"

"Because once I had a little girl about your age, who looked something like you."

"Is she dead?"

"I lost her."

Rose nodded, fully aware that the word "dead" was seldom used by real ladies, who substituted the funny word "lost." Simple, comfortable souls, like Crump or Mrs. Veal, seemed to prefer the plainer English.

"Do you think your little girl went to the good place or to the bad place?"

"To the good place."

"Little girls don't always go there."

"My little girl has gone there."

"Perhaps she met my mother. God wanted her most particlerly."

After this there was more talk, most of it from Rose, but she remembered little else, except that she had told the adventure to the Aunts, and Aunt Jacqueline had walked out of the sitting-room, blowing her nose much louder than Rose herself was permitted to do.

When she was eight years old, another incident made a profounder impression. Aunt Prudence took her upon her knee and told her that "His Ex."

was dead. She did not use the word "lost," and said nothing about his going to the good place, which struck Rose as odd. Lord Brough's daughter remarked pensively, "His Ex. used to call me an ugly little devil," whereupon Aunt Prudence whispered: "Try to forget that, my darling." But she hadn't forgotten it, and a conscientious effort to forget it served to impress it indelibly upon her memory. Equally vivid was the recollection of travelling to London, and attending a service in a big church, where she saw a gentleman who was no other than the Prince of Wales. Afterwards, he had spoken to her, and had said in a kind voice, "You must never forget that your great father served his country faithfully." Then he had bent down and kissed her, not once, but twice. He didn't kiss the Aunts, but they had curtseyed to him, as Mrs. Veal curtseyed to them—something which Rose had never seen them do before.

She enjoyed one immeasurable advantage denied to Rosetta. The Easters had four children, including a little girl of Rose's age, who, ultimately, cut out Miss Marguerite entirely. Also, Mr. Easter was a "jokey" man, and as such a source of never-failing interest and excitement.

"In what way is he 'jokey'?" asked Aunt Jacqueline. It worried her dreadfully that Prudence and she were never able to raise the rare laugh which rippled so delightfully from firm little lips.

"I'll tell you," said Rose. "At luncheon to-day I found a caterpillar in my lettuce."

"How horrid! I hope you took no notice, and pretended it wasn't there?"

"Ought I to have done that? I didn't. I said to Mr. Easter: 'Oh, there's a green caterpillar in my lettuce,' and then he said: 'A green caterpillar? Well, you needn't eat him unless you particularly want to.' I did laugh. Aunt Prudence and you never make jokes like that. He *is* a nice man."

Jacqueline answered dreamily: "Your dear mother used to say that we couldn't see the funny side of things. I suppose she was right."

Before Rose was sixteen she perpetrated this epigram: *Happiness is independent of Happenings.* The years of her childhood rolled by so swiftly and pleasantly that she might have been unconscious of their passage had it not been for the alternation of the seasons and the change in herself. She was happy, because two middle-aged spinsters devoted themselves heart and soul to that particular end. The same ladies had been devoted to Rose's mother, but in Rosetta's case they had deemed it a duty not to spoil the child, imposing innumerable petty tyrannies and restraints. The sense that every act was criticised made Rosetta unhappy; the sense that every act was commended made Rose the most joyous of children. After her father's death, she became a ward in Chancery. The family solicitor—a genial person, who conveyed the impression that time was of no value, an impression subsequently obliterated on perusal of his charges—travelled to Charminster to give details, and, incidentally, take note of the child's condition and surroundings. By the time the young lady reached the age of twenty-one she would be worth what old-fashioned folk called—a plum. Meanwhile, over and above her allowance of 200*l*. a year, anything in reason would be paid. Horseback exercise, for example. Another hundred a year. Anything in reason.`

"That will come later," said Prudence. "The present allowance is ample."

"A capable governess?"

"She, too, will come later."

"Well, well, as I say, in such cases the Court is disposed to be generous. Anything in reason, my dear Madam, anything in reason."

"We will apply later on."

"Yes, yes. Meanwhile—it seems absurd to mention it—but forewarned—eh? Exactly. As a ward in Chancery, the young lady cannot marry without the Lord Chancellor's consent."

"Bless me!" said Prudence testily. "The child is not yet nine."

"I merely mention it. And ten years soon pass. For that matter, I knew a ward in Chancery who wished to marry when she was sixteen. And this young lady will have four thousand *per annum*—a snug income, very!"

In due time a French governess came to the Dower House, a charming woman (carefully chosen by Mary Mauleverer), who understood the Aunts. When she praised Rose's accent, the child said:

"Aunt Jacqueline will be pleased. She taught me what I know."

Already the child had developed a passion for reading, and, much to the disappointment of the ladies, rejected as dull the dear familiar books which had entranced them forty years before. Mr. Easter spoke of Rose as the "Time Spirit," being at some pains to explain to the ladies the new constructive ideas now percolating everywhere, and their relation to Youth and Age. The ladies lent attentive ears to the clergyman of the parish, but it is to be feared that they understood little of what he said. Prudence would say, not quite so didactically as of yore: "I don't notice these changes, Mr. Easter, and surely you will admit that the great fundamental principles which govern human conduct are the same?"

"Subject to modification—yes."

"What modification?"

"The increasing intelligence of the proletariat, for example."

"How can that modify fundamental principles?"

"Let us admit that what was regarded as fundamental in the days of the Plantagenets is not so regarded now. My father, a squarson——"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Half squire, half parson, and a very sound thinker, held that men and women should be content in the sphere in which they were born. That point of view is almost obsolete."

"I grieve to hear it."

Then he would smile pleasantly and change the subject. Once a month he wrote to a certain Mrs. Newman, the wife of a novelist now coming to the front, and these letters can be summed up in a phrase: "It is well with the child."

Between the ages of seven and sixteen the greatest influence in Rose's life was the portrait of her mother. Jacqueline stumbled upon this illuminating discovery. One morning, before the death of Lord Brough, Rose had been extremely disobedient, and for a punishment was set the task of copying out ten times the line "Obedience is necessary to Success." This axiom, neatly framed in plain oak, hung upon the walls of the old schoolroom, and Rosetta must have copied it, also as a punishment, at least ten thousand times. Presently Jacqueline came in, brimming over with forgiveness and tenderness, to find the imp busily engaged in flicking ink upon the axiom itself and the wall upon which it hung.

"What are you doing?" gasped the Aunt.

"I'm Moses," replied Rose gravely; "and these," she indicated the blots with a wave of the pen, "are a plague of locusts."

"You are a wicked little girl," said Jacqueline, solemnly.

"I know I am; that's why Moses sent the locusts to plague me."

This revelation of a dual identity only exasperated Jacqueline. But she felt unequal to deal with such a moral exigency. Prudence must be consulted at once. Unwilling to leave Moses with the locusts, she led the prophet into the inner drawing-room, and then went in search of Prudence, to whom the sad story was related.

"This must never occur again. Flinging ink! What a naughty little maid!"

The Aunts stared at each other in sore perplexity. As yet no serious punishment had been inflicted upon Rose. Prudence retired for a moment and returned with a tiny ivory-handled riding-whip, an early Victorian affair, very light and thin.

"Three cuts on the hand with this," said Prudence.

"Oh, Sister! If we should hurt her too much!"

"Take it," said Prudence.

"Sister—I—I can't do it."

"I don't ask you to do it. Take the whip! Now." Prudence held out her thin, white hand, palm uppermost. "Give me one. Don't be foolish, Jacqueline! One firm cut, if you please."

Jacqueline inflicted a stripe that could not have seriously damaged a fly.

"Pish!" exclaimed Prudence scornfully. "Much, much harder."

In her agitation Jacqueline struck too hard. Prudence winced, but she endured the pain with Spartan fortitude.

"Thank you," she said. "Where is the child?"

"In the drawing-room."

"What! You left her alone with the china?"

"Gracious! I never thought of that."

In silence the Aunts descended to the first floor. The door of the drawing-room was ajar, and through it came the sound of a childish voice.

"What is she up to now?" murmured Jacqueline.

The ladies peered in. Rose was upon her knees in front of her mother's portrait. She was praying fervently:

"Oh, my dear, make me good like you! I *am* such a naughty little maid!"

The ladies went silently upstairs. A few minutes later Jacqueline found Rose very subdued. Acting under instructions, she said gently:

"Aunt Prudence and I are not going to punish you because we are sure you know how naughty you have been, and that you will try hard to be better in the future."

For several days Rose remained as meek as the Moses she had impersonated.

After this incident they sought and found opportunities to leave Rose alone with her mother's picture. Indeed, this realisation of the fact that Rosetta lived in the heart of her child became a beacon to the Aunts. By it they steered an unswerving course. They began to talk to Rose of her mother, relating incidents of her childhood, displaying work done by her—the first sampler, a bookmarker, and a score of similar treasures, over which Rose gloated delightedly. Is it necessary to add that the departed mother was visualised as a saint, impeccable, a gem of "purest ray serene"? In their hearts the ladies had enshrined Rosetta as saint indeed, inasmuch as she had endured patiently a martyrdom of six long years. It is tragic to reflect that good women, actuated by the best motives, make the profoundest and most far-reaching blunders.

Moreover, different as their treatment of Rose was from that accorded to Rosetta, the extremes met upon the seamy side of things, or, it would be more correct to say, stopped short of Hog Lane and all it included. Evil as an abstraction was familiar enough to the child; evil, in its material aspect of poverty, ignorance, and vice, was deliberately ignored.

The blinds remained down.

CHAPTER II

WHICH INTRODUCES VERE

WHEN Rose was fourteen Mr. Easter offered to teach her Latin. His daughter, Vere, who had cut out poor Miss Marguerite in Rose's affections, happened to have inherited her father's scholarly tastes. She was a year older than Rose, and a dominating influence in her life, although Rose—so the Vicar remarked—possessed the stronger character. Mrs. Easter was a mother cut true to the Mauleverer pattern, and therefore *persona gratissima* at the Dower House. Her other children were exactly like her, and with them we are not concerned except collectively. As so many pounds of solid conventionality they presented to Vere (who resembled her father) and Rose a burden to be shouldered, although not without protest. Mrs. Easter may be adequately described as a "nice" woman. The adjective was always in her too prim mouth. The Vicar's sermons, Rose's Sunday frocks, the miniatures of the Aunts, the herbaceous border at the Dower House, were alike commended as "rather nice!" For the rest she was plump, motherly in appearance, wore her hair in smooth Madonna bands, and was counted by all Charminster to be exactly what a clergyman's wife should be. To crown her perfections, she belonged to an ancient county family.

Vere had been a thorn in her side. Vere had ideas! Were it not heresy, if not blasphemy, to question the rulings of Providence, Vere ought to have been born a boy instead of a tomboy. She looked like a jolly boy, being blessed with a disarming grin and most powerful muscles. With the gloves (she subscribed to buy a set) Vere could hold her own with a brother a year older than herself. She climbed trees and robbed nests. She played cricket when she got the chance and loathed the piano. She mimicked dear Mrs. Pogany to her face.

Rose adored her.

It was Vere who shouted with laughter when Mrs. Easter was reading aloud "The Pillars of the House" to Rose and the other children.

"It's such fun," she replied, when Mrs. Easter paused to inquire the reason of this mistimed hilarity.

"Fun?"

"Rather—isn't it, Rose?"

"Yes," said Rose, now giggling convulsively.

"I can enjoy a joke as well as anybody," remarked the Vicar's wife, "but Miss Yonge is not trying to be funny, I can assure you."

"That's it," spluttered Vere. "She's funny without knowing it—isn't she, Rose?"

"Yes," said Rose.

"If you would kindly explain to my limited intelligence what you both mean, I should be obliged."

Vere considered this soberly, understudying her father.

" One can't explain jokes to people who don't see them. What makes me laugh is that there are so many pillars to this old maid's house."

" Oh! That's your idea of fun, is it? I should have supposed that a gifted authoress like Miss Yonge had a right to introduce as many characters as she pleased. I may tell you that the children in this book were drawn from life, from the children of the Bishop of Meichester.'

This produced a calming effect. A bishop fully robed, inspired awe. Vere murmured reflectively:

" Yes; that makes a difference. I'll try to laugh inside."

The reading continued without further interruption.

Of course, the Aunts remarked that Latin was all very well for boys who could not possibly be turned into gentlemen without it, but surely Rose might employ her time to better advantage. Notwithstanding, the lessons began, and Rose went about with her pocket full of slips of paper covered with Latin words, and repeated to Crump, who was lyrical when alone in her pantry, the set of verses beginning:

> Common are to either sex,
> *Artifex* and *opifex* . . .

To be candid, neither Vere nor Rose sucked quite as much pleasure out of the Latin primer as did, for example, the Lady Jane Grey; but they loved Mr. Easter's jests, which punctuated agreeably tiresome idioms. The Vicar, for his part, was never happier than when the little girls were with him, and he taught them, quite unconsciously, many things more important than a dead language, infusing that love of knowledge for its own sake which had distinguished him as a scholar. He called the pair "Notes of Interrogation," and answered their questions with discreet humour, laughing with his pupils, never at them. In a dim confused way Rose began to grope for what she felt, but didn't know, stretching out delicate tentacles, fastening tight on to what provoked curiosity, divining, with her mother's instinct, that a fascinating universe encompassed the garden of the Dower House.

The time has come when we must attempt her portrait. At fifteen she was attractively plain, with no promise of Rosetta's beauty. Tall, and very thin, she carried above too narrow shoulders a head that intelligent strangers stared at with interest and curiosity—a head not unlike her famous father's, with the grimness and cruelty left out. Colour brightened the whole face, which had lost its sallow complexion; you looked in vain for the glowing damask rose-cream of Rosetta, but a suffused pink indicated sound health. The head was too long and the features salient. She was proud of possessing the Mauleverer nose, delicately aquiline, with extremely thin and sensitive nostrils. Her teeth, very white and well-shaped, revealed themselves easily; the chin stuck out fearlessly rather than aggressively. The eyes were delightful—finely set and of a vivid blue. Her hands and feet were long and thin.

Twice, during her life, she had visited Mauleverer Court, accompanied by the Aunts, who, ever since that memorable and painful scene with Mary at the Dower House, had regarded the wife of the Head of the Family as "odd" and "un-English." Mary had promised Rosetta that she would keep an eye on the child. And, at Rosetta's request, she had written to Lord Brough explaining at length the peculiar circumstances of Rosetta's "passing." He had replied curtly that in his opinion the parties to the pious fraud had acted with a ridiculous lack of common sense. However, they could please themselves. Rosetta was dead to him, he added, and he hoped that he would never hear her name again.

In the next editions of "Burke" and "Debrett" Rosetta's death was duly recorded. Septimus and she went abroad; the world, as Rosetta had foreseen, supposed that Lord Brough's wife had either killed herself or perished of remorse.

Nevertheless, complications arose after Lord Brough's death. He died intestate, and as he had not divorced Rosetta she was entitled to part of his estate. This was explained to her by the Vicar of Charminster, to whom she wrote in reply that she could never touch a farthing of her late husband's money. She married Septimus, and they lived in great seclusion in a remote part of Westmoreland.

At Mauleverer Court Rose enjoyed herself mightily. So much so, indeed, that the Aunts questioned the expediency of taking her there too often. They were frightened out of their wits at the possibility of "unsettling the child." Their alarm was needless. Rose was far too happy and healthy to become "unsettled," which is perhaps a condition depending more upon the gastric juices than squeamish ladies like to admit. Mary, of course, saw deep into the artless soul of the Aunts, and wrote to Mrs. Newman in her turn that it was "well with the child."

Vere Easter kept Rose wholesomely mischievous. Long before the Latin lessons began Rose had confessed to her friend that it was no fun at all being naughty at home, because the Aunts never really punished her, but contented themselves with slightly reproachful glances.

"I feel," said Rose, with happy inspiration, "that I'm slapping Aunt Jacqueline—and she is such a dear. Yesterday I put sugar into the salt-cellars when Mrs. Pogany came to luncheon, and Aunt Jacqueline said it was a little harmless jest. Harmless! I looked such a fool!"

"We must do something up here," replied her sprightly friend.

The *something* evolved itself, with alluring excitements and procrastinations, into this. The Vicarage faced Charminster High Street, and on foggy evenings, after tea and before Crump arrived to escort Miss Rose to the Dower House, it was possible to slip out of a convenient side door and spend a delirious five minutes in the High Street. Rose, racking her brain to discover some original form of naughtiness, conceived the idea of startling solitary foot-passengers who chose to walk in the middle of the road, by stretching across it a thick piece of Berlin wool. The girls walked, each upon opposite sides of the street, holding the wool nose-high. When the wool came into sudden contact with a face it broke, and before the stranger could find out what extraordinary thing had struck him, the girls were swallowed up in the friendly darkness. Vere, fired to higher achievement, borrowed without leave her brother's fishing-rod. To attach a bunch of keys to the end of a line, to sit at an open window upon the second storey, and drop the keys behind some old gentleman hurrying home to his muffin, and then to raise the point of the rod so that the keys dangled out of sight while the old gentleman groped about on the pavement, afforded the young ladies a joy the greater because all manifestation of it had to be suppressed. We refrain from describing other pranks which at any rate served the purpose of preventing Rose from becoming a prig. *Majora canamus.*

Vere was sixteen when her sharp little ears caught a whisper against the fair fame of Rose's mother. Like Rose, she had come to regard Rosetta as a saint in sprigged muslin, some one to be spoken of in a reverential, subdued tone. The Rose who talked rarely of this wonderful mother was an utterly different creature to her familiar friend, and on that account fascinating, because not so easily understood. It was still hard for Vere to realise that all mothers were not like Mrs. Easter, or Mrs. Pogany, or Mrs. Walkington, the banker's wife. She often wondered what effect an angel mother would have had upon her, and decided that it was as well perhaps that they were not too common upon earth. She summed up such speculations with: "They can't expect too much of me."

Upon the first Thursday of every month Mrs. Easter was at home to Charminster gentlewomen from four till six. The Misses Mauleverer were conspicuously absent at such entertainments, which were never missed by Colonel Pook's wife, or Mrs. Hooton, or Mrs. Pogany. Mrs. Hooton was the lady we have met before as Laura Pogany. She had married Hooton, the auctioneer and real estate agent of Charminster. Hooton ought to have been master of a lower form in Charminster Grammar School. He presented a slack, loosely put-together appearance, and had succeeded a burly father, who had built up a substantial business.

Laura Hooton was described by Rose's French governess as *une bonne gazette du pays*: She knew, "as a fact, my dear," all that had happened in Charminster since she came to it as a baby, and much that had not happened also. Possibly she was never so happy as when talking about the ladies of the Dower House. Mrs. Pook, whose husband had come to the sleepy old town because good and cheap golf could be enjoyed on the downs to the north of the residential quarter, listened with ill-concealed impatience when Laura was "Mau-levering," as she called it. The ladies had not called upon Mrs. Pook, and Laura, of course, was maliciously aware of this.

Vere was hovering about handing seed-cake and brown bread-and-butter, when Mrs. Pook said tartly:

"Why do these old maids give themselves such ridiculous airs?"

Vere became interested at once. She disliked Mrs. Pook, she was always amused by Mrs. Hooton, and she adored the Aunts.

Laura answered sweetly:

"As a new-comer I daresay you notice things which escape *us*, but when you are with them drinking tea out of those wonderful Nankin cups, do they really strike you as giving themselves airs? I should be so interested to know."

"I am not one of the privileged few who do drink tea with them. They have not honoured me by calling upon so humble a person as myself."

"I'm so sorry," murmured Laura. "You have met them elsewhere?"

"I have not."

Vere edged nearer, wriggling with delight, confident that Laura would land heavily in one moment, and thinking, "Wouldn't I like to have a go at her myself—old beast!"

Laura said silkily:

"Then how do you know that they give themselves airs?"

"It is enough for me to see them sail into church," said Mrs. Pook. "And when I remember that their sister ran away from her husband with another man, leaving poor Lord Brough, whom my dear husband knew intimately, to die in South Africa, I say to myself that a little more humility in entering the House of God would not be out of place."

Laura caught a glimpse of Vere's horror-stricken face and lost her head.

"Shush-h-h-h!" she commanded, as if she were speaking to a fractious child.

"Really, Mrs. Hooton, I think you forget yourself. I am not a baby, nor a fool, nor a gossip. I deal, like you, in *facts.*"

With that she rose majestically and sailed across the room, leaving Vere staring open-mouthed at a quivering and crimson visitor.

"What did she mean?" gasped Vere. "Whatever did she mean, Mrs. Hooton? How dare she speak like that of Rose's mother?"

Once more the unhappy Laura enjoined silence, with a sibilant "Shush-h-h-h!"

Vere offered seed-cake to a lady who already was unable to dispose of a large slice, and very nearly dropped the brown bread-and-butter. Laura followed Mrs. Pook.

"I beg your pardon," she said in a frightened whisper. "I quite lost my head, but that terrible story has been buried with the poor lady herself. The Misses Mauleverer know nothing about it—nothing at all. They think that Lady Brough died *before* she ran away. She is a sort of saint to them. There has been for years what my father, Dr. Pogany, calls 'a conspiracy of silence' to keep from the Sisters the dreadful truth. And the little girl has made a saint of her mother also. Forgive me for speaking rudely, but I was terrified because Vere Easter, who is the dearest friend of little Rose Brough, overheard every word you said."

Mrs. Pook was a jealous, dyspeptic creature, but sound enough at core. She was horrified. Laura was distracted by fright, or she might have perceived that she had indeed "landed" heavily.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Pook. "I am very much distressed, Mrs. Hooton. You will have to smooth things over to Vere Easter. I promise to make the only amend possible. I will join your kind conspiracy of silence. I am truly most concerned."

"Thank you," said Laura.

A few minutes later she managed to corner Vere. She took the girl's hand and patted it.

"I must tell you the truth," she said gravely. "You are too young, remember, to understand, or to pass judgment. Lady Brough, poor unhappy woman! did leave her husband, who behaved with shocking cruelty to her. She died within a week, how and when and where we don't know. *The Aunts don't know it.*"

Vere gasped. The spheres seemed to be reeling. Like Rose, she had been brought up on the old system, swathed in cotton-wool. This was her first intimate contact with deadly sin.

"She went away with another man?"

"Yes, my dear. It would be wicked to lie to you."

"Then, then"—Vere grew white—"she broke the Seventh Commandment?"

"Alas!—yes."

As tenderly as possible, because Laura had loved and admired Rosetta, the matron explained to the maid how the disaster had come to pass, and the inviolate silence concerning it in Charminster. When she had finished, Vere understood dimly that life would never be quite the same again. Laura concluded:

"Promise me to try to put this from you."

"I can't, Mrs. Hooton."

"Bury it, dear, as we have buried it."

"They think her perfect—the best woman who ever lived."

"You must forget, as I have forgotten."

"But, you see, you haven't forgotten. And I shall never forget—not if I live to be a hundred."

After this a certain constraint insidiously established itself between Vere and Rose. Inevitably when Rose spoke of the dear saint, Vere remained miserably silent, crimson at first with a confusion which did not escape the sharp eyes of Rose, who leapt to the conclusion that poor Vere, with what might be called an uninteresting mother, was slightly bored and conceivably jealous—a horrid thought, but not to be evaded by a logical mind. Soon afterwards she ceased to mention her mother to her friend. Nevertheless there were allusions. It happened that Vere was discussing with Rose the case of a servant sent away from the Vicarage because she pilfered. The thief was young and pretty, and a favourite with the children. Vere said emphatically:

"I've talked it over with Father. Florrie was sacked against his wish."

"What?"

"Mother told him before me that she was mistress in her own house and must be allowed a free hand with the maids, which bowled poor Father out; but he confided to me that Florrie came from Hog Lane, and that pilfering was in her blood. He made me see that even the greatest sins, like breaking the Commandments, may be committed under extenuating circumstances."

"Vere!"

"I thought you would be surprised. It rather staggered me. And he knocked me bang off my legs when he went on to say that, however much we hated the sin, we should have compassion on the sinner, and that the wisest man who ever lived could never really take into account the excuses that might be made for the sinner—things like heredity, and surroundings, and physical weakness, and all that. I wish you could have heard him."

"He would have let Florrie go on associating with us?"

Vere smiled, catching a faint echo of the Aunts.

"I suppose it's like this: He thinks that Florrie would not be likely to turn us into thieves, and we might help to make her a little bit more honest."

"Vere, there is something in that."

Then Vere, hardly conscious of what she was attempting to do, instinctively feeling her way, said impressively:

"It comes to this, Rose, we're all sinners. I'm outrageously disobedient and cheeky to my elders and betters. The recording angel, all things considered, may think me worse than Florrie."

"What rubbish!"

"I tell you there's a lot in it."

"There are saints and sinners. My mother was a saint."

Silence!

"You will admit that she was a saint?"

"Well, I didn't know her."

"Do you think my Aunts would lie about her?"

"Of course not; but do sisters even ever really know each other? The Aunts think you frightfully good. If you died, they'd make a little saint of you."

"What nonsense!"

"Well, I've made up my mind to study sinners and sin."

"Vere, that does sound exciting."

"It's what we're here for. Father divides the lot of us into helpers and hinderers, builders and breakers. Up to date I've been a hinderer and a breaker. I may have had the cheek to think I was a helper, but Father rather flattened that idea by pointing out that the worst hinderers were those who fatly believed themselves to be helpers. I had an awful suspicion——"

"Yes?"

"Rose, I hardly dare whisper it. I had the strangest feeling that he was thinking of Mother."

"Vere, what awful things you do say!—but I like you to say them to me."

"I must speak out to somebody. When Mother is pi-jawing me, and what she calls 'helping,' I feel a regular devil."

"Aunt Prudence remarked last Sunday that your mother was a truly good and virtuous woman."

"I daresay. All the same, I believe in my bones that she's one of the hinderers."

Upon top of this confidential conversation came an exciting experience with the Vicar. His pupils were construing the passage in Livy which describes the leap of Curtius into the chasm which the soothsayers declared could only be filled with Rome's greatest treasure. This led, naturally, into a discussion of heroes who had sacrificed their lives for others and the quoting by the Vicar of the familiar text: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Whereupon, to the amazement of Rose and the parson, Vere said abruptly:

"I can think of a greater love even than that."

"Can you?" said her father.

Vere was scarlet, as she asked: "Would it not show even greater love if a man risked his soul for a friend?"

Mr. Easter looked at her, wondering why the maid blushed. She was thinking of Rosetta.

"What have you in your mind, child?"

"Suppose a man or a woman committed a deadly sin for love of a friend?"

The Vicar sighed, for he too thought of Rosetta, beholding her beautiful face, hearing her soft voice, sensible that such a sinner might well be forgiven because she had loved much. He glanced at Rose, struck, perhaps for the first time, by the change in his pupils, no longer to be reckoned as children.

"You have touched," he replied slowly, "upon the supreme question. Only a bold man would presume to answer it; and I am not bold. I have held what some of our friends in Charminster indict as 'odd' views upon the question of seeking salvation, and these are deep matters for two little maids. Still, I'm not such a coward as to evade the issue. The seeking of our own salvation, regardless of everything else, of which we have such remarkable examples in St. Simeon Stylites and St. Mary of Egypt and thousands of like misguided folk, has done much to injure the true teaching of Christ. The enemies of Christianity accuse us of seeking our own salvation selfishly, often at the expense of others. If it is so sought, I fear that it may not be gained. To imperil it with deliberation, no matter what the motive may be, is a tremendously grave matter. The issue would lie between the man who took such risks and his God, because God alone could read his heart." Then he added quietly: "You two are growing up fast, but don't perplex your minds with these problems yet. They must be faced when you attain to your full stature."

CHAPTER III

ENTER DEREK DEVENISH

ROSE was allowed certain recreations denied to Rosetta. She learned to play tennis well, to ride, and to dance. The dancing classes were held at the Vicarage during the winter, when a mistress came once a week from London. Rosetta, without lessons, had taken to dancing nearly as quickly and easily as a swallow learns to fly, but Rose, not so graceful, had to be taught carefully.

At the first dancing class, when she was nine years old, she met Derek Devenish, a handsome boy of fourteen. After that winter Derek voted dancing a bore, and never appeared again as a pupil, but he met Rose frequently, and she developed for him the same extravagant admiration which Septimus Lovibond had inspired long ago in Rosetta.

The Devenish family had come to Charminster just after Lord Brough's death. They were "quality," and received as such by the townspeople, who wondered what wind had blown the strangers into so quiet a port. The obvious answer was poverty, against which the best have to trim sail. Somehow it was understood, after many repetitions, that Mr. Devenish might have "done anything" so often an excuse for doing nothing. Laura Pogany, on the eve of becoming a bride, spoke of him as "dashing." He had a distinguished air, and a leg that would bear comparison with Sir Willoughby Patterne's. His position became impregnably secure when it was known that the Misses Mauleverer had called upon Mrs. Devenish, a little nondescript woman with a nervous manner and a frightened expression in her eyes. Derek was the only child.

Within a year, it leaked out that Mr. Devenish, whose name figured honourably in "Burke," held smashing views on subjects dear to the heart of Charminster. He knew intimately Anti-Christ, as the famous member for Northampton was then called. He scoffed at parsons, doctors, lawyers, and schoolmasters, disposing of them collectively as "humbugs, thieves, and liars." This was hard to bear, even from the third cousin of a marquis, but the fact that he was handsome tempered reprobation.

Mr. Devenish had taken upon a twenty years' lease a pretty cottage, with a garden sloping to the Char. In summer-time, Derek would punt up the stream to the Dower House, and invite the Aunts to spend an hour with him on the placid river. He taught Rose to punt, and suggested to the ladies the propriety of presenting a punt to their niece upon her next birthday, a suggestion gratefully adopted.

By this time the Aunts had almost forgotten the existence of Septimus Lovibond, and his flirtation with Rosetta. They were aware vaguely that Septimus was prosperous, for they heard once a year from his dear mother. It never occurred to them that history has an exasperating habit of repeating itself. They liked Derek, because he had curly hair and nice eyes, and of course he was a Devenish. The father's opinions did not affect them, because none quoted them to the ladies, certainly not Mr. Devenish himself, who drank tea out of the Nankin cups and discoursed about Oriental china, of which he was a connoisseur. He recognised the Misses Mauleverer as fine porcelain, and, like Dr. Pogany, spoke of them as *pâte tendre.* He challenged pity by describing himself as a man of losses, with no mention of the turf, where he had squandered a modest fortune. Derek was sent to the Charminster grammar school, much to the young gentleman's disgust. He said to Rose :

"I was put down for my father's old house at Eton when I was three years old."

"Does it make much difference ?"

"A lot. No use, though, trying to explain that to a kid."

He called Rose "Kiddy," and "Kid," and "Kidlet," conveying the impression that she might thank her stars at being addressed by him at all.

She did.

When she was fifteen and Derek just twenty, the young fellow was pitchforked into the Charminster Bank, a private concern, owned and managed by Mr. Walkington. Derek raged furiously and impotently, threatening to enlist. Rose said :

"Why, don't you ?"

He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out sixpence.

"Heads I do, tails I don't. Which do you want it to be, Kiddie?"

"Heads," murmured Rose.

He spun the coin.

"It's tails."

This incident impressed Rose. She grasped the notion that she was a factor in Derek's life. If she had said "tails" he would have inferred that she wished him to become a clerk. He knew now that she entertained ambitions for him, counselled a dash for the open, a flight into the blue.

As he pocketed the coin, he said ruefully:

"I might have won the Victoria Cross."

"You may yet."

That challenged his attention. Evidently, the fall of the sixpence had not closed the affair for her. Then, very savagely, letting himself go, he said:

"Mother and I are under father's heel."

"Derek!"

"You are old enough to know, and wise enough to keep a secret. I shall talk to you as I would to a sister. Thank the Lord, I haven't got one. He'd bully her too."

Rose shivered, but she tingled with impatience to hear more.

"He's a brute to her. Everybody knows it except your aunts. Everybody talks about it, which is so awful for her. Beats me, why she stuck to him."

"Derek! You don't know what you are saying."

"Don't I, just! Now, look here, if I tell you something, will you swear that wild horses won't drag it from you ? "

" No, nor the tame asses in Charminster."

" Kid, you're a rum 'un ; that's why I tell you things. Now, don't jump out of your skin, but mark me well. I'm as strong as a bull, but he's stronger. Luckily, he's not quite so hefty as he used to be, and more or less out of condition. I'm fit, and hard as nails. I can take a lot of punishment—and he can't. If I caught him on the point —point of the jaw, that is—he'd be down and out. Now—pull yourself together !—I'm going to do it—I'm going to thrash him, as he's thrashed me."

Rose gasped.

" Not because he thrashed you ? "

" No ; because he's been such a brute to her. You don't know, Kid, you can't imagine, what a brute a man can be to his own wife."

" I can imagine—horrors."

The expression upon her face perplexed him. Out of some inner zone of subconsciousness rose the conviction that she did know. She tried to remember why she knew, and failed. But the odd feeling remained that brutality had come into her own life. She heard Derek saying in his passionate young voice :

" I have envied you, because your father is dead."

That struck a chord. Instantly, she recalled the incident of her father letting her fall upon the back of her head. She beheld his hard face, his cold eyes, his grim smile.

" I'm a beast," said Derek. " I've frightened you, you poor little Kiddie. I oughtn't to have told you. I wonder why I did tell you ! "

"Because you know that I'm your friend."

"That's it."

Long afterwards, she realised how much this talk had affected her. It bore immediate fruit in the reflection that her home life was so amazingly different from Derek's. It engendered a desire to return some of the love showered upon herself. More than once, of late, she had avoided the daily walk with the Aunts to the high ground, where more bracing air might be inhaled. The ladies walked slowly, stopping often to admire some effect in the landscape or sky. Whenever she walked with her aunts, Rose was seized with a desire to run, the instinct of healthy youth to bound on, leaving age behind. She wanted, also, to outstrip their slow talk and halting thoughts. Always, the dear ladies stopped short when confronted by obstacles, turning back upon the well-trodden paths, afraid of the *vias tenebrosas*. Rose had come to the conclusion that youth and age were happiest in a punt. Youth with the pole, expending suppressed energies; age reclining upon soft cushions, watching with introspective placid gaze the world roll by. When the ladies delivered themselves of some time-worn platitude, Rose could dig the pole viciously into the mud, and by the time she had pulled it out again all sense of exasperation had vanished.

Age, in the person of an elderly groom, accompanied her upon her rides, but she never hesitated to outstrip him, galloping away as soon as she reached the springy downs. She would return home slowly, partly to cool her horse, and also to cool her attendant, who was pledged to discreet silence.

After the talk with Derek, she walked patiently with the Aunts, smiled when they remarked that the " trees were no longer in full beauty," and made no comment if Aunt Prudence happened to observe for the thousand and first time that the liberty accorded to young people was likely to degenerate into licence.

Crump, with one eye round the corner, was well aware that the blinds remained down. And Rosetta's injunction was not forgotten. But the ancient handmaiden could not bring herself to break the unwritten law of the Dower House. At odd moments, when conscience pricked, she might throw off mysterious hints, which whetted curiosity without satisfying it.

" 'All is not gold that glitters,' " she remarked to Rose.

" Is that your own, Crumpie ? "

She called the ancient one Crumpie, because Rosetta had done so.

" No, Miss Rose ; it's what you might call a maxim."

" Now what does it convey to you ? "

Crump would shake her head mysteriously, and squint dreadfully.

" Lor', Miss, can't I pass a remark without you snapping me up ? "

Rose would be inexorable.

" Crumpie, what does it mean ? "

Then, tremblingly, Crump would lift two inches of the blind.

" Well, Miss Rose, it means for one thing that under all the pomps and vanities, the eating and drinking, the laughing and singing, is a vast deal of misery."

"Crumpie, have you ever been *very* miserable?"

"Who hasn't, Miss?"

"I haven't for one."

Then Crump would retire hastily.

"I don't know what your aunts would say, if they heard me chattering nonsense, and all the silver to clean, too."

"I'll help to clean the silver—which is always so beautiful, Crumpie—if you'll tell me what made you miserable."

But Crump was not to be drawn, even with the subtlest flattery.

When Rose was sixteen, Septimus Lovibond died. He had been failing in health for some time; and the Vicar of Charminster had long known that the end was inevitable. The obituary notices of Paul Newman were unanimous in declaring that the loss to literature was very great, although it was admitted that the author of "Mists" had not quite realised the expectations which that famous novel aroused.

"Mists" was the first book to captivate the interest of the many. Rose had never heard Paul Newman's name. The Vicar commended the novel to the Aunts, as one that would be likely to interest Rose. But he was careful not to mention that he had received a letter from the widow of the author, with the book, asking him as a particular favour to arrange that her daughter should read it. Rosetta concluded: "It deals with life as seen through young eyes, and the treatment throughout is, to my mind, admirably suggestive, and free from the too mawkish sentimentality which does so much to spoil a girl's palate for really nourishing food. Perhaps you will read it yourself first." The Vicar did so, and was delighted.

By the luck of things, the book was not read aloud. Rose devoured it in two sittings. Little did she guess that every page was informed by her own mother, and that much of that mother's life was being described with a convincing realism entirely new to the daughter. Rose, for the first time, found her own nebulous thoughts put into words. "Mists," as the title indicated, obscured the vision of the principal characters in the story. At the end they soared above them. The novel is now so well known that any synopsis of it would be unwarrantable. Its effect upon Rose is the thing worth recording. Rosetta, perhaps, had not foreseen that the enjoyment of a book by a new author is certain to stimulate an inordinate appetite for more of the same fare. Vere read the book, and talked it over with Rose. The pair agreed that another novel by the late Paul Newman must be read at once. Prudence dipped into "Mists," became fogged, and fell asleep over it. She remarked to her niece:

"I am glad you like it, dear, but it is too modern for me. The author, however, seems to have been a scholar and a gentleman, and I see no objection to your reading other works from a pen so refined and restrained."

"Thanks," said Rose.

Had she consulted Aunt Jacqueline, there might have been objections, for Jacqueline had never been able to purge her mind of a most regrettable incident. She had read with delight Maupassant's "Collier de Perles," and had forthwith plunged into "Bel Ami." Having an ample supply of pocket-money, Rose bought Paul Newman's "Back of Nowhere." This was the Book (with the capital "B") which Septimus had begun to write in New Zealand. He re-wrote it after his elopement with Rosetta, thanking Fate that he had not published it years before. In it he dealt drastically with himself and the Parbury System, describing with vivid realism his struggles and sufferings after he had lost health and fortune and love.

Before Rose was halfway through the book, she knew that the Aunts would be horrified at her reading it. But she was too fascinated to lay it aside, although sensible that conscience couldn't be salved with the reflection that she had obtained Aunt Prudence's permission to read it. Having read it, she made confession to the vicar, inviting him to impose a penance. The parson read it also, and was certainly confounded, but comforted himself with the conviction that Rose couldn't have understood half the allusions.

"The penance is this," he said. "No more Paul Newman for Vere and you till you're out of leading-strings."

Rose meekly acquiesced. Nevertheless the book had discoloured her imagination. It was awful to think that Derek might find himself at the Back of Nowhere, if he carried out his threat of thrashing his father. Living in a house with blinds drawn between herself and everything disagreeable, she had dismissed the awful possibility as "unlikely" to occur. "Back of Nowhere" sent her wandering with Derek into mining-camps and saloons, where the young fellow might be ruined body and soul, if "it" did come to pass. That "it" became a hair shirt upon her tender skin.

During the winter, she saw Derek but seldom. He worked at the bank from nine till five, growing daily more restless and irritable.

"In twenty years," he told Rose, "I may be assistant manager, with three hundred a year! Jolly, isn't it?"

"But you like Charminster, Derek?"

"Charminster is too old-maidish for me. I can't think straight in these crooked old streets. I can't breathe deep, can you?"

"I am very happy here. I love the place and the people."

"But sometimes—let's have the truth—don't you feel a bit stifled?"

"Not yet," she answered cautiously.

"These old towns are all right for old men and women; snug anchorage, I admit, but there's too much 'rotting at ease.' The worms are at work, Kid. One can sniff decay, the dry rot hidden under carefully waxed floors. That confounded bank reeks of it." He threw back his shoulders. "I want more room. Honour bright, now—don't you?"

Her blue eyes sparkled.

"And other company?" she suggested.

He laughed gaily, and when she heard that ringing laugh, she knew that Charminster wouldn't hold him long.

"You rum Kid! If I do cut and run, I shall often think of the Kidlet."

"Not you."

"I shall. You and the Aunts represent a lot to me: all I've not had—home, kindness, love." He pulled himself together, and said rather stiffly, "You understand?"

"Yes," she whispered softly.

Another day he said to her at the Vicarage:

"I've saved up twenty pounds—twenty jolly yellow-boys."

"What for?"

"For emergencies, my young chick."

She hardly slept that night.

The thought of decay—so abominable to the young—began to obsess him. On another occasion, he said to his *confidante*:

"We're all saprophytes here."

"Gracious—what's that?"

"Maggots."

"Oh, Derek—how nasty!"

His mouth flickered humorously.

"If I'm nasty to you, it's because Mrs. Easter thinks me 'rather nice'! What an expression! Rather nice! Yes, maggots, burrowing busily into rotten conventions and traditions, unable to see or feel anything else. Pah! I should like to twang the banjo, while that old bank was blazing."

Rose considered this. She did not present the appearance of a maggot, when she said slyly:

"You've got something to learn, Derek."

"What?"

"To take things and people as they are instead of as you'd like them to be."

"One for you, Kid; all the same, it's the spirit of discontent which keeps this old world pottering on."

A month later the nightmare fear of losing his companionship became a fact. Derek thrashed his father with a heavy hunting-crop, scored him from head to heel, and fled the cottage with remorse in his heart and twenty-five pounds in his pocket.

Rose had the story red-hot from his quivering lips. Knowing her habits, he had waited till she returned from riding, and drew her aside into a corner of the stable yard.

"I've done it," he said hoarsely. "And I feel like Cain, not because I've licked him, but because I must leave her. Somehow I never once thought of that. It happened an hour ago, after breakfast. He ragged both of us at breakfast, sneered at us in his beastly cold-blooded way. We escaped, but he followed us into the passage, where his old crops hang on the wall. There he fairly let the mater have it, and the dining-room door was open, and the parlourmaid listening to every word. He swore at mother, the poor darling, and I told him to shut up. I was cool, Kid, but this had to come. I told him to shut up. I told him that if he didn't shut up, I'd make him. That, for the future, he would have to keep a clean tongue in his mouth. Well, that maddened him. He seized one of the crops, and let me have it on the top of the head. Then I saw red, and we went at it. I twisted the crop out of his hand, and I'll spare you the details."

"And now?"

"I'm kicked out, of course—to sink or swim.

I'll swim, never fear! Old Walkington won't sack me, because I've sacked myself."

"And your mother?"

"I think that after this he'll leave her alone, because I told him, when he showed me the door, that if he didn't behave I'd come back and kill him. I saw fear in his eyes. Good-bye, Kiddie."

He held out his hand.

"Where are you going?"

"To Southampton. I'll write to you, when I get a billet."

"Good-bye, dear Derek."

He gripped her hand, and swung off, carrying a high head. She didn't see him very plainly, for her blue eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER IV

THE AUNTS ENTERTAIN AMBITION

TEMPEST raged in the Charminster teapot when the town heard the tale of the thwackings. Most persons were glad that Devenish had been soundly thrashed, but sorry that his son had done the deed. The horror of the Aunts may be taken for granted; and they refused to listen to details, which, in extenuation of her friend, Rose was eager to offer. Their attitude was exasperating to the girl, but not quite unexpected. A fortnight previously, a missionary from the slums of Whitechapel had preached in the parish church. He was sent out—having a fiery eloquence of Salvation Army quality—by a society (not the S.P.G.) which concerns itself with rescuing the waifs and strays of London. He preached with none of that refinement so dear to the Aunts.

"Go home," he shouted, "go back to your comfortable beds, and sleep in them soundly, if you can; but remember," he shook a minatory finger at the Aunts, "that in the slums where I come from children don't sleep in beds, but under 'em, and they have to turn out when half the night is over and go back to the streets, because other shivering children are waiting to take their place!"

In his excitement he dropped an "h" or two; his hair was red and bristly; he suffered from some affection of the eyes; and his hands were a disgrace to the Church of England. The Aunts listened to the impassioned harangue, blinking short-sightedly at the preacher, wriggling upon the red cushions of their comfortable pew. Walking back to the Dower House, Prudence said with dignity:

"I can't believe that such things happen in our beautiful England."

Rose opened her mouth to reply, but closed it. The futility of further discussion made her dumb.

Jacqueline murmured nervously:

"It is very cold. I should not be surprised if we had snow before night, or frost. Our daffodils may be nipped."

At the Dower House the name of Derek became *tabu*. He had broken the Fifth Commandment, and was therefore anathema. Rose received a letter from him, which she did not show to her aunts.

"DEAR KIDDIE,

"I have shipped as a sailor before the mast, for a voyage round the Horn. My present destination is San Francisco. It's going to be tough, but I'm tough stuff. I never told you that the mater has a small income of her own, and if he doesn't treat her better, she's promised me to leave him. So my mind is easier. Don't worry about

"Yours ever,

"DEREK."

The last injunction was not obeyed. Rose read Dana's book, and dreamt that Derek was washed overboard. She could see his handsome face sinking to green depths, where monsters waited for him with hungry maws. Awake, however, she was sustained by the conviction that the young man *was* "tough," and, as one of the fittest, likely to survive—and return.

What tales he would have to tell!

Meantime, the Aunts were cherishing an ambition carefully concealed from virgin eyes. The Head of the Family had planted a vigorous seed, when he said, one day:

"You have never seen my heir?"

"We have not."

The heir to the Mauleverer title and entailed estates was a second cousin, once removed. Unhappily he was poor, and the Aunts knew that Mauleverer had been "nice" to him, paying for his education at Eton, and afterwards making him an allowance sufficient for a subaltern in the Rifle Brigade. Mary's money was settled upon herself and her girls, two of whom had married. Of course, if anything happened to dear Mary, Mauleverer might marry again, and beget sons, but this possibility was beyond the horizon of the ladies. Humanly speaking, a favourite phrase of Prudence's, Victor Mauleverer would succeed his kinsman, and find himself encumbered with a large estate and houses much too big for a man without ample means. As the entail was determined in him, Victor might sell the Court and the valuable heirlooms it contained.

Mauleverer said, with his genial laugh:

"He ought to marry Rose."

"To be sure," said Prudence. "I never thought of that."

Jacqueline and she thought and talked of little else for more than a month. Rose was seventeen; Victor was four-and-twenty. The sooner the young people met, the better!

Accordingly, they did meet at the Court during Christmas week, about a year after the abrupt departure of Derek Devenish. Rose had heard from Mrs. Devenish that her son had disembarked at San Francisco, and was working upon a fruit ranch. Seemingly, work before the mast had agreed with him. He landed in the state that is called Golden in high health and spirits, and able—so he wrote—to "whip his weight in wild cats"; nevertheless the voyage had been "tough."

Victor Mauleverer now challenges our attention. His "points" were what might be looked for in a cadet of an ancient and honourable family. He could ride boldly to hounds, and shoot straight, and tell the truth. If he had been brought up to believe that the world owed him something, he was modest in not demanding too much.

Of horses, both to ride and drive,
  Three at the utmost ought to do;
And at a pinch, one might contrive
  To get along with two.

A few nice rooms—just here a book,
  And there a picture—decent wine,
Good carpets, and a cultured cook,
  And I should not repine.

Victor, it is true, wanted a little more than this, but he prided himself upon not being a "grabber."

In his regiment, the other fellows were men of the same kidney, quiet in dress and manner, sticklers for "form," holding bounders in abhorrence, younger sons, for the most part, of country squires, with a sprinkling of nobility like the sparkle of old landed champagne, no froth, if you please, no loud popping of corks, no heavy gambling, no plunging at Kempton or Sandown Park—in fine, officers who lived up to their uniform. The latest joined subaltern was expected to be *invisibly* green.

Victor would have been horrified if anybody had called him a sponge, or a prig, or a snob. And yet, as will be seen, there was a tincture of all three in his attractive personality. He had sponged upon his mother, whom he adored; he was priggish when he talked of fellows in "some line regiment"; you had a glimpse, only a glimpse, of the snob when he expressed guarded admiration of things essentially mean, although he had not been taught so to regard them, things which may be summed up in the word "appearances." The outside appealed to him tremendously, because he had been trained not to look below the surface. He would have stigmatised Derek Devenish as "rather hairy at the heel," had he chanced to overhear the conversation with Rose about maggots.

Outwardly, the Fates had been kind to him. He was a true Mauleverer, fair of skin and hair, with pleasant blue eyes which turned instinctively from what might offend them—a tall, slender, graceful figure, with the indefinable stamp of "race" all over him.

From the cradle to the day when we meet him, he had taken for granted that certain blessings were inalienably his. And, although he would not have said so for a king's ransom, he knew himself to be superior to all such poor devils as schoolmasters, bankers, brokers, and men collectively, who were constrained to struggle for recognition and fortune.

The Head of the Family had hinted genially that little Rose Brough was worth a plum, adding that it was easier to marry money than to make it. Victor nodded. It was all-important that he should find a dear little girl with a reasonable amount of her own, but there was no hurry about that—yet. He said frankly that money alone would not tempt him. He had a holy horror of the millionairess.

Rose pleased him. For one thing, she sat her horse squarely, and, secondly, she didn't prattle or gush. Rose might "do."

He was not equally successful in pleasing her. She liked him, but suspended judgment. He was rather "sidey," so she wrote to Vere, and incapable, so far, of exhibiting enthusiasm. He refrained from "rather nice," but "not bad" was too often on his lips.

The Aunts approved of him at first sight. Jacqueline said:

"He is just like the eleventh lord."

"More Mauleverer than Mauleverer."

Rose walked beside him out shooting. Victor pulled down a rocketer, and remarked to his companion that he hated slaughter.

"I ask for quality, not quantity," he observed. Then he added: "I expect you are rather particular, too."

"Why do you think so?"

"You're a Mauleverer."

"I'm half Brough."

"Your father was a wonderful man. They talk of him still in South Africa. His life ought to be written. I suppose you have lots of stuff, letters and diaries, and all that?"

"I don't know."

"Jove! Here's a screamer coming! I must nail him when he sails over that tree."

A cock pheasant, thirty yards up, was neatly taken "in the beak," and crashed stone-dead at their feet.

"A beauty, that?"

"Yes."

But Rose was admiring the resplendent bird, not the shot. Victor went on:

"This might be made a topping shoot."

Rose wondered whether he was thinking of what he would do when he came into his kingdom. Would he devote himself to sport? As if in answer to her thought, he said reflectively:

"Our great-grandfather used to keep the hounds. However, it's no catch being an M.F.H. nowadays. The fellows who don't subscribe crab you behind your back, and the fellows who do, to your face. None of that for me."

"You are very keen about hunting?"

"Two days a week, over the cream of the country. Mauleverer has sound ideas about that. The main thing is to get all you can out of life—spread your interests evenly."

"And your profession?"

"Well, between ourselves, soldiering's not the game it was. They work us too hard. The best sort can't stick it."

"I should have thought the best did."

"Oh, come! You know what I'm at. By the 'best' I mean the fellows with a certain position."

"I see."

"They chuck it after a few years."

"But aren't you well rid of them?"

He opened his rather sleepy eyes at this.

"We"—his own regiment was indicated—"don't think so."

Then the birds began to come in rapid succession, and Victor was busy with his loader. After this particular "rise" the ladies returned to the house.

Next day they went hunting. As riding to hounds was a new experience to Rose, Victor offered to pilot her. Somewhere at the back of his mind simmered the idea that this would be one of several tests, so to speak, to which the possible future wife should be subjected. She ought to be able to ride "above a bit." He disliked your "cut-me-down" women even more than your timid sort, who played the deuce with horses. The happy mean for him in everything. In the billiard-room, before the start, he told Mauleverer that Rose seemed to be all right, but he asked anxiously:

"Not too clever, is she?"

"'Um," grunted the Head of the Family, "Rodney Brough's daughter ought to have brains."

"One wants brains in a wife, but the cleverness mustn't stick out. Mary has brains, but she never makes a fool feel a fool."

"Mary is past fifty, my boy."

"The fact is, I'm rather taken with little Rose."

"Good."

"But, thank the Lord! there's no hurry. She's barely seventeen. I've a clear two years anyway."

"That's as may be," said Mauleverer. "You take my tip, Victor, and capture her before the other fellows begin buzzin' about her. Remember this, when she comes out you'll be with your regiment. Her mother, now——"

He broke off confusedly.

"You've never told me much about the mother. Bolted, didn't she, with another fellow? And died?"

"Yes."

"And the Aunts and Rose don't know about the bolting?"

"No."

"What were you going to say about the mother?"

"Well, we had an Under-Secretary on the string for her. He's a tremendous swell, now, a Cabinet Minister. It looked a cert, because Rosetta was only just eighteen, but the other fellow, the cove she bolted with, had done the trick. The old ladies were napping."

"I see."

"If you do, it's all right. Young girls fall in love with the first really decent chap that comes along. You happen to be he, and my last word to you is: 'Make the runnin' now!'"

They had rather a pottering day, but Rose responded to the tests imposed, and listened meekly to much excellent advice. She was no funk, and keen as mustard, without making a fuss about it.

There had been a stile to negotiate—a nasty place, but Rose insisted on having it. Afterwards, she never "bucked," and, riding home with her pilot, paid him more than one well-deserved compliment. Victor was very much pleased with her.

"I must have a lot of talk with the little dear," he reflected, as he dressed for dinner. "Might tackle books, but I don't suppose she's read the new ones. Plays? Been to only three! Pictures? Not my strong point."

Eventually, he talked about himself, not egregiously, and always with agreeable detachment. Derek had talked about himself, also, and a comparison between the two men became inevitable. Each had inherited his political opinions. When Derek declaimed against saprophytes, he was unconsciously echoing Mr. Devenish; Victor Mauleverer, the son of a Colonel in the Guards, had never heard the word.

"I might try Parliament, if a bit of luck came my way," he remarked to Rose, in the subdued tone of a Rifleman carefully trained not to speak about himself to an audience of more than one.

"Are you expecting a bit of luck?"

"Not expecting it; but there's a great uncle of mine, a shocking pincher between ourselves, who might leave me a very nice little pile, enough to be cosy on, you understand?"

"Not quite. What do you call enough to be cosy on?"

"Anything between three and five thou. a year. I never did envy rich men. They have to do things which bore them to tears."

"Isn't that the common lot of rich and poor?"

"You're absolutely right, *ab*-solutely! Rich and poor must consider others; your cosy fellow pleases himself."

"Is that good for the cosy fellow, in your opinion?"

"Do you mean from the parson's point of view?"

"Not particularly. From any practical point of view."

"Well, you know, Rose"—his tone was even more discreetly lowered—"I shan't pose before you or anybody else as—as—dash it! What is the word I'm after?"

"An altruist?"

"Right you are! Most men are selfish; and I've had to think about Number One. I had to pinch a bit at Eton. I have to go slow in the regiment. I'm not whining, but with me sixpence has to do duty for a shilling. So you see I've learnt values. I know better than any subaltern in my battalion what is worth while and what isn't."

"You interest me so much, Victor."

"Do I? Somehow you rather draw me out. I feel I can talk to you frankly, as—as a pal."

"That pleases me so much. But—about the things that are worth while? Do go on."

He went on, as before, but with a cocksureness latent beneath his modest, slightly deprecating manner.

"The fact is, I can't avoid the conclusion that there's a lot of muddling. So few of us seem to know exactly where we are, and then where are we?"

"You do know where we are?"

"Why, yes, I think so. I face the fact, for instance, that I'm dependent on others. I don't like it, but there it is."

"But—I daresay I'm asking a silly question—couldn't you be independent, if you choose?"

He stared at her, open-eyed with astonishment. Mauleverer, at the end of the table, was talking loudly to Prudence. Mary, at her end, was listening to an anecdote. Under cover of the babble, Victor said impressively:

"I took it for granted you knew that I haven't a bob of my own. My father left just enough to my mother to keep her decently in a tiny house in Chapel Street. Mauleverer has been awfully good to me. Independent!"

"I did know what you have just told me."

"Really? Then how could I possibly be independent?"

Rose answered guilefully: "I see now that you couldn't be."

"Rather not."

"I was thinking for the moment of a man I know slightly." (Oh, Rose!) "He had a row with his—his people," a faint flush came into her cheeks, "and he left home to sink or swim, with twenty-five pounds in his pocket."

"Was he a gentleman?"

"Yes."

"What on earth did he do?"

"He shipped as a sailor before the mast."

"Is that your idea of being independent?" He didn't wait for an answer, but continued, not quite so composedly: "Your friend is *déclassé*, and when you meet him again you'll mark a change, not for the better. A fellow who was at a private school with me, and then went on to a third-rate public school, and afterwards became a civil engineer, called on my mother the other day. He ate two plates of thin bread and butter, talked at the top of his voice, contradicted my mother flatly, and ended by flinging himself back in the chair and kicking the whole tea-table sky-high. Her Crown Derby cups were smashed to smithereens."

"What did Mrs. Mauleverer say?"

"She said that she hoped he hadn't hurt himself. Not bad—that! Now my point is that he used to be a gentleman, his people are all right, but he's the rankest of outsiders now—and independent!"

"I should like to meet him," said Rose.

"He'd give the Aunts a fit. What darlings they are, exactly right! And a type nearly extinct, the old-fashioned gentlewoman. I hope they cotton to me?"

"In their eyes, you are exactly right, too."

"And what am I in your eyes, my clever little cousin?"

"I don't see you quite plainly yet."

CHAPTER V

DEREK COMES BACK

THE Vicar of Charminster had long ceased to regret being an accessory to what once he considered a fraud. Time had justified silence in regard to the passing of Rosetta, although he was humorously conscious that he might have a bad half-hour if the truth became known to his excellent wife. He was aware, also, of a soft corner in his heart for sinners who expiated sin. He divined what it had cost a loving mother to abandon her child; and in every letter since the death of Septimus that love seemed to shine out, increasing in strength and tenderness.

He was sitting in his study, upon a stormy April morning, reading the latest of these letters, which exhaled a faint perfume of orris-root reminding him that the writer, in a sense, was laid aside, shelved, with only orris-root to scent the memories of the past. The ladies at the Dower House were fond of orris-root.

"I hear" (Rosetta wrote) "that the heir of the Mauleverers has been making love to my little Rose. Can you tell me anything about him? Lady Mauleverer says he is much liked by everybody, which to me is faint praise. Her description of him, and his resemblance to some of the portraits at the Court, make me rather uneasy. Are his blinds down? I was much amused at Rose having read 'Back of Nowhere.' It's not food for babies. But Rose is no longer a babe; and my earnest wish is that you will use a large discretion in the opening of the child's eyes to what lies beneath and beyond her vision. Every night she comes to me in my dreams, as if entreating the help which I could give her. I feel certain that she needs a woman such as I have become, and that the need will grow stronger every day. How good and kind you have been to her!"

The Vicar locked up the letter in a tin box. Then he answered it, in his fine scholarly handwriting.

"I have met Victor Mauleverer twice. After Christmas he paid a visit to the ladies, and drank tea here. Inheriting, as he has, the fine qualities of your family, he has not escaped their disabilities. Take it from me that the blinds will probably remain down for him, unless something quite unforeseen happens. He would make Rose a kind husband, and be dominated by her, for she has her father's strong will. He is sleepily complacent, with an air about him of 'everything is for the best, in the best of worlds.' *He is unquestionably most attractive.* Particularly to women, old and young. Outwardly a gallant figure. He is likely to win Rose, although he pursues her at a walk, and she might do so much worse that I'm trying to accept him cheerfully. My wife says of him: 'There's a young man who will never give his mother a moment's uneasiness.' Does that help you to see him? I should add that Mrs. Easter's ideal of manhood is not on all fours with mine."

After sealing the letter, the Vicar lay back in his chair, and mused. In fancy, he was transported to the Dower House, wafted thither by the faint fragrance of orris-root. He smiled pleasantly as he beheld the ladies, such gracious figures, more beautiful in age than in youth. Their hair had turned very white, which set off delicately tinted complexions and soft blue eyes. They were slightly deaf, and very short-sighted. Prudence had changed more than Jacqueline, for she had lost an expression of severity which at the time of Rosetta's marriage was tracing ugly lines upon her face. She still looked austere, and could deal drastically with breakers of the law, and unruly maidservants, reigning supreme as the uncrowned queen of Charminster.

"Would the Sisters forgive Rosetta now?"

The Vicar often asked himself this question, not to be answered with satisfaction. Time and time again had he approached the ladies with some pitiful tale of sin and suffering. They would listen courteously to the clergymen of the parish—and write a small cheque, if money were needed. They refused positively to consider extenuations. Lapses of virtue in particular, provoked a tightening of the lips and the familiar lowering of wrinkled eyelids. They subscribed to Homes for the Fallen, but had not been known to enter one.

The Vicar shook his head, and lighted an old briar pipe. He preferred the smell of tobacco to orris-root.

As he struck a match, the parlourmaid came in.

"Somebody to see you, sir—a seafaring man."

She described the visitor with a slight toss of the head and in a petulant tone, being exasperated because the seafaring man had come to the front door. Common sailors, carrying bundles, ought, in her opinion, to be taught their place, even if they were young and good-looking. Moreover, this sailor had glanced indifferently at her, seemingly oblivious of the fact that she was a handsome girl.

"Show him in," said the Vicar.

Derek Devenish entered. The maid was a newcomer, or she would have recognised him. Mrs. Easter was not successful in keeping her maids.

"Bless me!" exclaimed the Vicar.

The men shook hands, as the maid retreated with a conviction that her master did not quite know *his* place. Derek laughed. He was rather damp, and smelled of the sea. His face was a clear brown-red, and clean-shaved. His eyes sparkled furiously, for the grip of the parson had warmed him.

"How are things?" he asked. As the Vicar did not reply at once, he added: "I came back, as I went, round the Horn. Landed this morning. Haven't been home yet: slipped up here first to make enquiries."

"You look very well, my boy."

"Never felt better. Mother all right?"

"Yes."

"And father?"

"Your father has been very ill. A neglected cold turned into double pneumonia."

"Has he—pulled through?"

"No; he is dead."

Derek sat down, covering his face. The Vicar said nothing for at least a minute. Then, with his hand upon the bent back, he murmured gently: "Your mother needs you."

Derek stood up, and lifted his head. He had not seen the Vicar of Charminster since the thrashing of Mr. Devenish, and the parson was one of the few men living whose good opinion he valued highly.

"The hardness has gone out of my heart," said Derek slowly. "The wind and the sea drove it out long ago. I meant to ask his pardon, but I say to you, only to you, that unless he had greatly changed he is better dead."

The Vicar inclined his head.

"When did he die?"

"Two months ago."

Derek picked up his bundle.

"I'm off to her."

"Come back, Derek; I'm a good listener, and you must have tales to tell."

"Yes; I can spin a strange yarn."

He went out a strong, vigorous man, able to fight for his own hand, the hand of a sailor before the mast. The Vicar sighed as he caught sight of the sealed letter to Rosetta. If Septimus Lovibond had returned to Charminster, penniless, carrying a bundle, but looking like Derek Devenish, how different Rosetta's life might have been!

Derek swung down the ancient High Street, and into Hog Lane. He walked as a sailor walks when just home from sea, and he stared at the land-lubbers with a twinkling eye, the sagacious glance of the man who has seen many men and many cities.

"Rum old place," he thought, "but I like it better now."

When he came to the Dower House he paused. The blinds were down as usual, the steps leading to the front door gleamed spotlessly white. The stone facings at the corners of the brick house conveyed to the young man an odd conviction of tenacity and endurance.

"Everybody is just the same," he reflected, "except me."

He had never been so conscious of the enormous change in himself as now, when he stared at the Dower House and thought of what it contained.

"Will they ever let me in?" he wondered.

To the right of the front door was an object dear to the heart of Thomas Veal, a yew cunningly clipped into the shape of a ship in full sail. As a boy, Derek had thought this the most admirable presentment of a three-master. To-day he reflected that the difference between life within and without the Dower House was not wider than the difference between the ship of yew, firmly rooted in the soil, and the weather-beaten barque which he had left only that morning.

He walked on, not so jauntily, to the Devenish cottage. Every object in the landscape appealed to memories, pleasant and otherwise. He used to hide in that old holly tree from his father. Vere Easter and he found a missel-thrush's nest in the pollard just beyond it, and some addled dabchick's eggs in the middle of that bunch of rushes. Butterflies, too! He had nailed a rare fritillary near these furzes, also a sanctuary in the hour of need. He remembered cutting an ash stick out of the copse just behind the furzes, and his father had thrashed him soundly with it some two days later. It exasperated him to be licked with his own stick. Six of the best! Laid neatly upon his back.

And now the terror of his youth was gone for ever. Derek supposed that some fellows would feel blue about it. He couldn't. The man was dead. Let him rest in peace!

Approaching the cottage, he slackened pace. It would never do to burst in upon his mother. She must be prepared. He decided to try the back door. Ellen Fudge, good faithful soul, would be sure to be in the kitchen. When he was sent supperless to bed, old Ellen would sneak upstairs with provaunt.

He knocked at the kitchen door, and Ellen opened it, screaming at sight of him.

"Whatever have you been doin' to yourself?" she asked, after the first greetings.

"Only growing," replied Derek. "Where's my mother?"

"In the droring-room with the Honnerable Miss Brough."

"The Honnerable Miss Brough? Does she often come?"

"Every other day, Master Derek, since the master died. You heard o' that?"

"Yes. Now I wonder whether you could entice Miss Brough out here. I should like her to tell my mother that I've come back."

"I might," said Ellen Fudge, cautiously. Then, with a glance at Derek's rough clothes, she added: "You can slip upstairs into your own room. It's ready for you. You'll find clean linen and all your things. We've a new cook in the kitchen."

"Oh—ho! You don't want the new cook to see me in old clothes. Well, my kind dear, I shan't change yet."

"I wasn't thinking o' the cook. Do you want the Honnerable Miss Brough to see you lookin' for all the world like a common sailor man?"

"That's what I am, Ellen. Now, hop off! I'll smoke a pipe."

Ellen obeyed. She came back triumphant.

"I managed it nicely. Miss Brough will come out directly. Since your pore father passed away, she's taken hold here. I made bold to ask her to look at our copper saucepans to see if they needed re-lining."

"I expect a lot of things want re-lining?"

Ellen nodded.

"I do wish, Master Derek, you'd just slip into decenter clothes—now do!"

"Not yet!"

Back of his mind was the wish that Rose should see him as he was. A good, kind Kid! He had always liked her. His heart warmed to her as ministering angel. Somehow he had never thought of her as that. He looked ruefully at his hands, stained by tarry ropes and disfigured by much use and abuse.

He had nearly finished his pipe when Rose came out.

She had changed tremendously. That was his first thought. It was no longer possible to think of her, or address her, as—Kid. Her skirts had come down; her hair had gone up. Her voice had softer and more subtle inflections. Without hesitation, she put her hand into his, saying simply:

"Thank God! you have come home."

"You've been looking after her?"

He spoke hoarsely, moved to rare feeling. She supposed that he was thinking of his dead father, whereas the dominating thought of his mind was "She's been kind to my mother."

Rose said lightly:

"I wish I could have done more."

"You're the right sort, and no mistake. Will you tell her that I'm here?"

"That will be a real pleasure, but it must be done quietly. She's not very strong."

He looked at her with shining eyes, saying nothing, for a wonderful thing had happened. He knew, somehow, that he cared for her. "Cared" is not quite the word, but it was the word he used to himself. He had always been attracted by the Kid, now he wanted the woman.

"God bless you!" he said with astonishing fervour, and the blush deepened in her cheeks as she turned from him.

He found his mother alone, a small woman in widow's weeds, who seemed to have shrunk. She kissed him repeatedly, and made him sit by her, holding his hand in hers, and looking at the stains and bruises. A nail had been badly torn. She kissed that, and stirred him to fresh tenderness. What wonders women were! What angels! For a long time she asked no questions, and said little herself, breaking off with odd inarticulate cries, squeezing his strong hand. She was very white and worn, with a bewildered expression in her faded eyes. Speaking of the father, she said, interjectionally:

"At the last—just before the end—he knew he was going—and he was sorry—he said so."

"That will be a comfort to you, dearest."

She did not mention her husband again, but presently she whispered: "You'll take those horrid clothes off?"

"Horrid?"

"I'm so sorry Rose saw you in them."

"You rum little mother! Rose is all right. Tell me about her. She's been good to you—eh?"

"Yes. And, of course, I bore her. I bore everybody. I bore you, I'm sure."

"Never! We must put a stop to this ridiculous humility. I simply won't have it. You must practise looking proud and haughty. Rose has come on, hasn't she?"

"Everybody says she's going to marry Victor Mauleverer. He's the heir."

"Who's everybody?" asked Derek grimly.

"Mrs. Hooton——"

"That cackler!"

"The Aunts have set their hearts on it. I hear he's such a nice young fellow."

"Nice, is he? That's encouraging."

"Yes; isn't it? Rose admitted that he was nice."

"Good."

"And her fortune will make it possible for them to live at the Court."

"You have it cut and dried, I see. Now—I'm off to make myself look 'nice,' too."

He kissed her, and went out of the small room, humming a ditty of the sea. Mrs. Devenish closed her tired eyes, and a faint smile broke upon her face. Her boy had come home.

CHAPTER VI

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

ROSE returned to the Dower House with a higher colour than usual. Derek had thrilled her, and she knew it and wondered whether he knew it. She was too young to make any attempt to sift and sort her impressions, or to speculate upon the future. The present alone engrossed her. Derek had come back. Derek had looked deep into her eyes. It would have troubled her to explain why she liked him so much. The fact that she did was all-satisfying. Had she known that her mother long ago had passed through a similar phase, liking immensely just such a man, an *ineligible*, according to the Mauleverer standard, she might have been even happier than she was.

At luncheon, she told the Aunts of the traveller's return, and both ladies frowned at mention of his name.

" Indeed," said Prudence.

" I suppose Mrs. Devenish was rather upset ? " hazarded Jacqueline.

" Why—upset ? "

It will be seen that Rose meant to force the pace.

" Oh, my dear, after what happened, and after the poor father's death, which may have been accelerated——"

"Heavens!" Rose exclaimed. Very emphatically she continued:

"Mr. Devenish died of pneumonia. Dr. Pogany told me that he would have pulled through, but he had no vitality left. His excesses as a young man——"

"What are you saying, child? Surely Dr. Pogany never mentioned that?"

"He did not mention excesses to me, although it seems ridiculous that he shouldn't. I'm repeating what Mrs. Hooton told as a *fact* to Mrs. Pook."

"My dear, you shouldn't listen to such gossip."

"Mrs. Hooton, Aunt Prudence, has a penetrating voice. Mr. Devenish is dead. Derek, however, is alive—very much alive—and I hope you both mean to forgive him."

She was going too fast, we must admit.

"Our forgiveness," said Prudence austerely, "cannot matter much to that young man."

"I think it will matter enormously. What you do and say will influence all Charminster. For instance, if this house is closed to him he will find himself more or less cut by Mrs. Walkington, Mrs. Easter, and the others. That will be rather hard on him, and torment to his mother."

The Aunts looked at each other in silence. Rose followed up her advantage.

"The 'cutting' of the son will bleed the mother to death."

"What strong expressions you use!"

"I'm rather pleased with that. It's so pat. I know you don't want to drive that poor little woman out of her home?"

"Of course not," said Jacqueline. "What an idea!"

"I tell you that she won't be able to live here, if you turn your backs on her son."

"What do you want us to do, Rose?"

"I want you to behave like the darlings you are. Be kind to him. Ask him to tea. Give him another chance to win back your respect and affection. I tell you he's worth it."

"You plead his cause warmly," murmured Prudence.

Jacqueline said nervously:

"The dear child is so fond of Mrs. Devenish."

"Very well," said Prudence. "We will do what you ask, Rose; and now let us talk of something more pleasant. We have a delightful surprise for you. Victor sent a telegram this morning. He has three days' leave, and proposes to spend it with us. He will be here this afternoon, dear fellow."

"That is a pleasant surprise," said Rose, seeing the beaming faces of her Aunts, whose ambitions were no longer secret from her. They had been kind about Derek, sorely against the grain, as she perceived, so she must meet them more than half-way in expressing delight at Victor's visit. After all, she did like him very much.

"You can put some violets into the spare room," suggested Jacqueline, quite excited at the prospect of telling Victor, later on, the name of the little person who would have placed them there.

"With pleasure," said Rose.

Prudence said carelessly: "Ask Derek Devenish to drink tea with us to-morrow."

As soon as Rose had left them alone, Prudence remarked:

"I gave way about Derek Devenish, although in my opinion he behaved *shockingly;* it is expedient that he should come to this house during the next three days."

Jacqueline understood.

"Sister, how clever you are! Yes; the dear child will have an excellent opportunity of contrasting Victor with Derek."

The ladies smiled happily, chuckling over their *finesse.*

"Rose is so observant," said Jacqueline, "and so innocent, sweet thing. That word—'excesses'!"

"Dr. Pogany ought to be more careful."

"It was Mrs. Hooton, Sister, who used the disagreeable expression."

"True. Odd that young girls of this generation should pick up such odious words. We never used them."

"Never!"

"It would be a blunder," remarked Prudence, "to let Rose perceive our feelings towards Derek Devenish. She has a stronger character than dear Rosetta."

"Oh yes, indeed!"

"Because of that we must employ a little guile. The child is so generous, so warm-hearted, that she would try to make up for any coldness on our part."

"I quite agree."

"It is, of course, important that there should be some sort of an understanding between our young people before Rose is launched in London. Mauleverer hinted as much to me."

"I have prayed that it may be so. One could hardly conceive of a more suitable match."

Thus they prattled, slightly flushed, stirred to tenderest feelings and hopes, feeling once more tiny hands clutching at their skirts and tiny lips pressing against their withered cheeks, believing with adamantine conviction that Rose's heart was an open page to their eyes. . . .

They were right in one important matter. Rose was indeed possessed of a stronger character than her mother. Perhaps from the first she had imposed her will upon the ladies. Had she desired to scrub floors, or to cook, or to trim hats, they would have interposed no objections. In place of such activities, she had learnt to ride and play tennis. Money had not been spared upon her education. She spoke French admirably, and played the piano with a sure touch. Constant intercourse with a scholarly man had enlarged her mind and her vocabulary. Rosetta had wanted to "know" things, and was kept from knowing them. Rose inherited the same appetite for knowledge, and was able to satisfy it. But of the seamy side she remained nearly as ignorant as her mother at her age.

Victor arrived at tea-time, looking, as usual, admirably groomed. He wore inconspicuous Lovat tweeds cut by a famous tailor, and his regimental tie was a distinctive touch of subdued colour. By this time he believed himself to be passionately in love with his cousin, although he told himself that any manifestation of passion must be suppressed rigorously in the presence of a maid so delicately nurtured, and one, moreover, with a keen eye for the ridiculous. Victor had never made himself ridiculous. He was one of that numerous band which provoked Louis Stevenson to exclaim: "God help the young man who is afraid of making a fool of himself!" Victor spoke French, for example, with a lamentable accent, because he believed that any attempt to understudy a Frenchman must invite sneers and waggery. In his own language he expressed himself crudely, for the same reason. Fellows with a gift of the gab were rather bounders. Not a thing to say, that, but a constant reflection. Intemperance of speech, he considered, was as much to be deprecated as intemperance in drinking. He stuck to barley-water at luncheon, and never exceeded a pint of champagne at dinner, preferring, indeed, a light table claret to the more exhilarating beverage. In politics he was crassly ignorant, and Conservative to the core. He never read a Radical paper, and would repeat with an odd petulance certain phrases culled from the Tory Press, such as, "Are we so much wiser, as a nation, than America and Germany?" or, with well-bred irony, "Do you really think, my dear fellow, that if Cobden were alive to-day he would be a Free Trader?" His petulance, the surest mark of an undeveloped intelligence, would exhibit itself mildly when any person strayed from the smooth groove in which he and his like rolled so comfortably to their conclusions. It never occurred to him that a lack of appreciation for Wagner, or Maeterlinck, or Bernard Shaw indicated something wanting in him. For that reason he enjoyed rambling talk with the Aunts, who, in his company, displayed the same peevishness concerning what was new and strange.

After tea he strolled up and down Charminster High Street with Rose, praising the ancient buildings and consigning all jerrybuilders to perdition. As luck would have it, they met Derek carrying a large brown-paper parcel, which contained half a dozen ready-made shirts. Derek was wearing an old blue serge suit, rather too small for him, and a hat that had seen better days. Rose introduced the young men to each other, and delivered Aunt Prudence's invitation to drink tea on the morrow.

"I'll come like a shot," replied Derek, perceiving that Victor's eyes were fixed in pensive astonishment upon the large parcel. "Shirts," he explained, tapping the brown paper. "I've grown a lot. There's nothing so exasperating as wearing a shirt with a collar at least two sizes too small."

He addressed Victor, who replied politely:

"It must be, very." He had never experienced such discomfort, or worn a reach-me-down shirt. Derek continued breezily:

"Collars are detestable—symbols of a fettered civilisation!"

Victor stared at him. When Derek demanded: "Don't you agree with me?" the heir of the Mauleverers answered, with a condescending smile:

"I have never found decently made collars uncomfortable."

"If you had mine on, you'd know."

This called attention to a collar rather frayed, and strained to breaking-point. Rose said hastily:

"Mr. Devenish only landed in England this morning. He came from California, round the Horn."

"Really," said Victor, confirmed now in his opinion that he was talking to the third mate of a sailing-ship. He added pleasantly: "That sort of experience would make me shrink."

"It was tough," said Derek grimly. He lifted his hat, and swung on down the street with the typical sailor's gait. Victor, who had a retentive memory for trifles, said with sudden inspiration:

"Is that the *friend* you told me about?"

"Did I tell you about him?"

"You said something last Christmas about hunting for independence before the mast."

"So I did. Yes, that's the man. He is a man now. He was a boy when he ran away to sea."

"Why did he run away?"

"You are sure to hear the story from somebody, so why not from me? His father, who is dead, bullied him abominably, and was brutal to Mrs. Devenish. Derek waited till he was strong enough to thrash his father. He did it very thoroughly."

"What an extraordinary story!"

"He's not an ordinary man, you see."

"Licked his own father! Rather thick—that!"

"His father began it—hit him on the head with a heavy crop."

"Well, I'm—dashed. Handsome beggar! Would look well in tarpaulins. A bit rough, eh?"

"And tough."

"Exactly. We think alike about these things. It takes many men to make a world."

"It takes men, most certainly. The monkeys didn't accomplish much, did they?"

"Monkeys! You don't believe in Darwin, and all that sort of rubbish, do you?"

"I believe in evolution."

Victor cocked his Norman nose at a higher angle.

"Now, what can a dear little girl like you know about evolution ?"

"Not much," retorted Rose, "but my ignorance on the subject isn't a very serious drawback, when I'm talking to young men."

The soldier and gentleman acknowledged the thrust with a smile.

"One for me, Rose. I'll admit that I don't poke my nose into evil-smelling messes. Those who wish to believe they've descended from monkeys can do so. I prefer to think I'm not. Shall we nip into the Vicarage ? Mrs. Easter is a good kind soul, eh ?"

"The Aunts think so."

"Don't you ?"

"I shall suspend my judgment till I'm five-and-twenty."

He laughed, and asked no more questions. Mrs. Easter was at home, and received "the dear couple" very graciously, but with the subacid reflection that she would be expected to buy a handsome wedding present. While this fox of a thought gnawed at her vitals, she smiled upon Victor, entreating his advice upon the knotty problem as to whether cretonne were more serviceable than chintz, and listening with discreet attention and respect to the words of wisdom which dropped sparingly from the lips of a future legislator. Vere, sitting apart with Rose, whispered irritably :

"I do wish mother wouldn't pile it on so. Now, she's off on bees. What can he know about bees ?"

"He's been awfully busy lately."

"I've noticed that young men like to be consulted, whether they know anything about a subject or not."

"Some young men," amended Rose.

"I say, do you know that Derek Devenish arrived this very morning?"

"I was at the cottage when he came."

"Rose, tell me exactly what you think of him."

"He won't offer your mother advice about chintz."

"Will the Aunts ask him to the Dower House?"

"They have already."

"You are a dodger! How did you manage it?"

Rose recited the facts, and Vere laughed so immoderately that her mother's attention was challenged.

"What is your joke, Vere? Pray share it with us."

"Mother, it's not worth repeating."

"We should like to be the judges of that."

Rose said demurely:

"I was telling Vere that a woman can always get her way, if she gives her mind to it."

"Where there's a will there's a way," quoted Victor, who carried much ballast of this sort. Mrs. Easter looked puzzled.

"I see nothing to laugh at. It's generally admitted that women of intelligence *do* get their own way."

With a glance at Vere, enjoining restraint, Mrs. Easter continued her conversation with Victor. They discussed, with entire unanimity, the impossibility of war being declared in the Transvaal, the Disestablishment of the Welsh Church, the incompetence of young female servants, and the advantage of buying groceries at the Stores.

"I have enjoyed our little chat so much," said Mrs. Easter, as she held the hand of the heir of the Mauleverers in a warm grasp. "Dear Rose"—she kissed Rose fondly—"perhaps I have to thank you for bringing Mr. Mauleverer to see me?"

"He suggested it, Mrs. Easter."

"I am indeed honoured. Good-bye——*au revoir.*"

Outside, Victor lit a cigarette, placing it in a long amber holder.

"Just what a parson's wife ought to be," he remarked. "She has a grasp——!"

"Moist and warm," said Rose.

Victor eyed her sharply. There were moments, happily rare, when Lord Brough's daughter alarmed him.

It was on her way back to the Dower House that Rose decided a point which had penetrated rather deeply into her mind. Was Victor one of the "all things to all people" crowd? She came to the conclusion that he must be—partly out of politeness, for his manners were almost too good, and partly out of laziness, being unwilling to risk humiliating defeat by provoking argument. She waited till he had smoked his first cigarette, and then said abruptly:

"Did you enjoy that 'little chat' with Mrs. Easter?"

He replied vaguely and elusively:

"One is interested, I suppose, in people, even if they aren't exactly one's own sort."

"Interested to the extent of agreeing with everything they say?"

"I hate arguing with women."

"You mean it's easier to agree with them, and perhaps laugh at them afterwards."

"My dear Rose, I never laugh at women. I owe them too much."

He said this with such modesty and sincerity that Rose melted, but she said with the faintest inflection of impatience:

"You don't do yourself justice, Victor."

He smiled, stroking his small fair moustache. Other dear delightful women had made this remark, and it was not unpleasant in this brazen blatant age to be counted amongst the few who did not "buck."

"Tell me exactly what's in your mind," he said softly. "If there's one thing I want more than another it is to stand well with you."

"That's it. I like to think of you standing, not sitting. I should hate to reckon you amongst the golden youths, all in comfortable stalls, looking on, rather bored, at what they consider a mild comedy."

"Isn't life a comedy?"

"Only to the very few."

"I'm not a strenuous chap."

"Why shouldn't you be?"

"I wasn't built that way. Strenuous persons are nuisances. Our colonel, now—I don't want to crab him—he means well—but of all the bothering, bustling, cut-you-down bores, he's the worst. If there's a row in South Africa, he'll be potted first."

"He would rush in ahead, like Lord Cardigan?"

" Bless you—no ! Colonels don't rush in. He'd be potted by one of his own Tommies."

" Because he's a keen soldier ? "

" Because something bites him whenever he sits still. He's an object-lesson to the rest of us, I can tell you. It bothers me awfully why people can't live and let live. That's my motto."

" It's a good one, properly interpreted."

" Eh ? "

" The second part of it is rather dependent upon the first."

" I don't quite take you."

" Well, if a man does live—if he gets out of life all there is in it for him—he has not much time to interfere with others."

" I don't. I mind my own business."

Rose asked no more questions, and Victor began to make mild love to her, hinting at this and that, feeling his way with the caution of your up-to-date skirmisher, keeping out of sight as much as possible. He was well pleased with these tactics when they reached the Dower House, and told himself, changing his metaphors with his clothes, that all Rose needed was a little managing, a light hand on the curb. He looked forward to a capital hunt on the morrow, with, perhaps, a kill in the open. It was the real right thing, good going from start to finish—and no checks !

CHAPTER VII

TEA AT THE DOWER HOUSE

A TEA-PARTY at the Dower House was a function, distinguished as such by an old-fashioned formality not without its peculiar charm. Tea was served in the double drawing-room, the folding doors between the inner and the outer rooms being flung back. Upon these rare occasions the blinds of the windows looking out on Hog Lane were pulled up, but muslin curtains obscured the mean view. The rooms had been distempered in yellow shortly before the birth of Rosetta, and the once too vivid colour had now faded to a delicate primrose tint, an admirable background for the pictures and colour-prints. Many of the pictures were pastels by Gardiner, and the gems of the modest collection included a beautiful Cosway drawing, and a Kitcat by Sir Joshua Reynolds of a Miss Prudence de Clancy. The frames of these pictures shone with the subdued radiance of old gilding. The carpets in each room were alike, copied long ago at Axminster from the magnificent Indian carpet which was in the big saloon at Mauleverer Court. The inner room was surrounded with dwarf bookcases of walnut, and there was a very fine Queen Anne cabinet in marqueterie filled with china, good, bad, and indifferent. Upon the tops of the bookcases were more china and some valuable pieces of Delft. The books, for the most part, were bound in calf and contained the de Clancy book-plate with its innumerable quarterings. Above two mantelpieces of the Adams period, hung French mirrors set in delicately carved and gilded frames. The chairs and tables included specimens of Chippendale and Hepplewhite, and in fanciful contrast to these a lovely bit of Boulle. The ancient Broadwood piano occupied one corner. The room, in fine, was a hotch-potch of things, which Time had made homogeneous. It had tone and atmosphere. Since Rosetta's day, slight changes had been made at Rose's suggestion—nay, entreaty. It was less prim and formal, and the armchairs and sofas were covered with a pretty but subdued chintz. Rose had wished to eliminate some of the rubbish—for rubbish there was amongst the china and prints—but the Aunts cared little for the intrinsic value of their possessions, regarding the whole, as a whole, with fond and sympathetic eyes. The silver of the tea-equipage was very early Georgian, but they insisted upon using a terrible Victorian urn, because it always had been used by their mother. It is painful to add that the door and window-casings were grained. But time had made the graining less offensive. Even Rose admitted that it would be difficult to redecorate the room without imperilling its character. No better setting for the ladies who lived in it could have been devised. It illustrated and revealed them—as they, in turn, illustrated and revealed it.

Mrs. Easter and Vere were amongst the first to arrive. Then Mrs. Walkington rustled in—a large woman, suggesting opulence, wearing heavy purple silk and massive jewellery—a banker's wife who inspired confidence in her husband's depositors. Mr. Walkington accompanied her, wearing the white waistcoat of a blameless life, with a heavy gold curb chain festooned across its bulging front. Mr. Walkington went to no tea-parties in Charminster except those at the Dower House. As one of the few males present, he lent the necessary note of solidity, representing institutions not lightly to be tampered with. Mr. Arthur Walkington accompanied his parents. He represented another institution—Fashion. The difference between him and Victor Mauleverer was comically salient, and for some minutes Arthur was unusually silent, filled with a futile regret that he was wearing new brown shoes rather too pointed at the toe, and a scarf-pin conspicuously provincial. He wondered unhappily how Victor Mauleverer achieved such quiet distinction in dress, but questioned the propriety of asking for the name of his snip.

Mrs. Walkington observed in a loud voice:

"Young Devenish has returned to Charminster."

"Yes," Prudence replied, "we are expecting him this afternoon."

"Ah!"

Having her cue, Mrs. Walkington continued:

"A handsome young fellow. We were sorry to lose his services at the Bank."

Crump ushered in Dr. Pogany and Mrs. Hooton. The medical attendant of the ladies saluted them punctiliously, bowing low over the slim hand that Prudence extended to him. His manner with Miss Jacqueline was a shade more gallant, indicating the courtier of long ago. Mrs. Hooton apologised for the absence of her husband, saying:

"Alfred is so distressed at not being able to come."

Victor, erect upon the hearthrug, glanced pensively at each in turn, summing them up as a weird lot. "Priceless," as an adjective applied to people, was not yet in vogue. Rose flitted about, wondering how Derek would be received by her Aunts. Mrs. Hooton was curious on this point also.

Conversation suddenly became particular, when Mr. Walkington mentioned young Lord Charminster, who was building a long row of new cottages upon strictly utilitarian lines. He had pulled down some picturesque but insanitary cottages to make way for the improved dwellings. It struck Rose as amazing that everybody present criticised Lord Charminster's taste rather than his judgment.

"The dear old town will be ruined," said Mrs. Hooton. "I know for a fact that pressure was brought to bear, but Charminster is as hard as the stone from his quarries."

Prudence said austerely:

"Lord Charminster can do what he pleases with his own property."

Mrs. Hooton betrayed slight uneasiness. She knew that Miss Mauleverer addressed the noble marquess as "Charminster," being of kin to him. She barely knew Lord Charminster, and in speaking of him should have given the young man his title. Having administered the tiny snub, Prudence said graciously: "I quite agree with you, my dear Laura, that the new row will be an eyesore. We shall never pass by it without lively regret."

"Those old cottages," said Rose, "were a disgrace to the town, and I wonder at anybody regretting their being pulled down, except Dr. Pogany."

"And why do you make an exception of me, my dear young lady?"

"They must have been a small but never-failing source of income to you."

Dr. Pogany chuckled.

"Tut, tut—I made little enough out of them."

Crump announced in a loud voice:

"Mr. Derek Devenish."

Derek entered boldly, successfully disguising his nervousness. He was quite sure that the Aunts would never be anything but courteous to an invited guest, but the others might be chillingly polite, or even rude. He wore an ill-fitting black serge suit, bought that morning, and a black tie. The white cuffs of the reach-me-down shirt were too large, and their excessive whiteness and gloss called attention to the stained and scarred hands The women, however, looked at his handsome head and sparkling eyes.

"I am glad to see you," said Prudence.

"Thank you," said Derek.

Jacqueline was more genial, being much affected by crisply curling hair. She remembered, also, pleasant afternoons in the punt. And, in her heart, she had feared and detested the father.

"How well you look, Derek!" she said, with kindly interest.

Victor greeted the sailor pleasantly, having purged his mind of any thought of him as a possible rival. The others followed suit, recognising that the past was to be veiled. Mrs. Walkington was of opinion that a son should not be seen in public till at least three months after the death of a father, but the circumstances in this case justified, perhaps, an exception. She whispered to Mrs. Hooton, "He is received back into favour"; and that lady murmured, "I know for a fact that he acted in self-defence."

Tea was served at a long table in the middle of the two rooms. The visitors sat round and about this, holding the famous Nankin cups very gingerly, and curbing appetite, for the delicate fare provided. The tea was Chinese of a quality not to be bought in Charminster, and from a special caddy Miss Mauleverer would add a pinch or two of Orange Pekoe.

Tradition ordained that, during the solemn rite, some topic of general interest should be discussed. Afterwards, the company could split up into groups.

Upon this occasion the talk meandered from theme to theme till it became concentrated upon a fire that had recently destroyed an immense London emporium. It happened that a girl of eighteen, a "shoppie" who "lived in," had displayed extraordinary courage in rescuing half a dozen companions who were apparently too crazed by terror to rescue themselves. From Mr. Walkington's "A very remarkable young person!" to the "What a ripper!" of his son, ran a high note of approval and admiration. But, to Rose's astonishment, Derek remained silent. Indiscreetly, she challenged this silence at a moment when everybody became alert to hear his reply.

"She must be one in a million—don't you think so?"

"I wouldn't say that."

Derek spoke seriously, with the air of an intelligent man trying to resolve a difficult problem. Regardless, possibly unconscious, of the interest he had excited, he said, in his clear uncompromising voice:

"An act of that sort is often—I expect generally—impulsive. The hero doesn't pause to think, or to reckon chances. Something stronger than himself forces him to action. To my mind, he is not then quite so heroic. The fellow I admire far more is the one who imperils his life for another deliberately, knowing that the odds are against him. I read this story a few hours ago, and from the girl's account she doesn't seem to have realised what she was doing. She was crazed with terror and excitement. She remembers thinking that her sister was in a room upstairs, and she rushed through flames to get to her. Having got to her, she remembered that there was a way out of danger across the roof. But the getting there was wild impulse."

Dr. Pogany said emphatically: "Explain it how you will, it was an act of supreme heroism."

"Not supreme," said Derek obstinately.

The company eyed him coldly. Prudence was about to change the subject, when Mrs. Walkington opened heavy fire.

"It is so easy," she observed, "to belittle the greatness of others."

Jacqueline looked alarmed, but Derek answered good-temperedly:

"I don't do that, Mrs. Walkington. But, oddly enough, a somewhat similar thing happened when we were off the Horn, a few weeks ago. A man fell from the main yard. A heavy sea was running at the time, and we were under full sail, making our ten knots easily. A fellow was after him before you could say 'Knife!' He never stopped to think; he saw a face in the swirling water, a look of appeal in the eyes, perhaps, and——bif!"

"Were they both drowned?" asked Jacqueline.

"By the merest luck, they were saved. A boat was lowered, and they were hauled aboard in the nick of time."

"Glorious!" exclaimed Dr. Pogany, rubbing his hands.

"Britannia," said Mrs. Walkington, "still rules the waves, and her sons are not afraid of them."

"All the same," Derek continued, "my point is this. Britannia's sons, and daughters, do accomplish big things sometimes because they don't think about them first. But your supreme hero looks first and then leaps."

"Perhaps this man did look," said Rose.

"He didn't. He was ashamed of the fuss they made over him. He knew positively that if he had thought of the sea and the pace he would not have left the ship."

"We had a case in our battalion," said Victor. "Tommy running amok. They do sometimes in the hot weather. He went off with a rifle and a couple of rounds of ammunition, and he was a nailing good shot, too. He took up a commanding position just off our parade-ground, and before any of us knew what was up he'd wounded a sergeant and a corporal in his company. I was there, and I looked, I can tell you. We all looked, and the more we looked the less we liked it Finally, our adjutant, unarmed, walked up to the man and took the rifle from him."

"That was supreme heroism," said Derek ; "the other was nothing at all." He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Did you see the man fall from the yard, Mr. Devenish ?"

Mrs. Walkington put the question acidly. She regarded Derek almost as a boy, and a naughty boy, too much inclined to give himself airs. No clerk in the Walkington bank would have dared to hold forth in the presence of the manager and proprietor.

"Yes, Mrs. Walkington."

"And you looked on ?"

Victor came to the rescue.

"As I did," he said pleasantly. "We can't all be heroes. Oddly enough, our Tommies thought that the adjutant was a bit of a fool."

"Thank you, Mauleverer," said Derek, with a twinkle in his eye.

Mrs. Walkington frowned. She said coldly :

"I may be wrong, but I feel very strongly that in these cases those who do look on have no right to criticise."

"They are generally the ones who do it," said Derek cheerfully.

"Were you looking on ?" said Rose, in an odd voice, addressing Derek very particularly.

"I was on deck," he answered, with slight constraint.

"You actually saw him in the water?"

"Yes."

His eyes dropped before hers. Rose gave the oddest little laugh, as she turned to Mrs. Walkington.

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Walkington, that those who look on should not criticise."

"It would be generally so conceded," replied the banker's wife.

"But, in this case, Mr. Devenish did not look on."

"What?"

"He jumped," said Rose positively.

Poor Derek grew scarlet. It was useless to deny it. He had jumped; and, analysing his feelings afterwards, he knew that he was not entitled to the enthusiastic acclaim of the ship's company.

"Did you?" said Vere excitedly. Jacqueline leaned forward, her soft blue eyes blinking with astonishment.

"Yes," said Derek; "I was fool enough to jump. The odds were a thousand to one against me."

"You pulled it off," murmured Vere.

Derek looked at Rose.

"You are a wretch."

"A witch," amended Dr. Pogany. "How did you guess?"

"He spoke of the appeal in the drowning man's eyes. Only one man could have seen that."

Then Prudence pronounced the verdict:

"Derek"—he marked the use of his Christian name—"has justified the high hopes my sister and I entertained for him. I am honoured that he is with us to-day."

At such dramatic moments it is quite easy not to do the right thing. The good blood in Derek which had made him leap without looking, fortified him now. He rose from his chair and bowed to his hostess.

CHAPTER VIII

DISCLOSES MAIDEN MEDITATIONS

VICTOR returned to his battalion without putting the portentous question to Rose. He tried to put it, but the maid eluded him, slippery as any eel. He justified procrastination with the plea that she ought to "look round" a bit and see the other fellows prance. He felt reasonably assured that the work he had done was solid. And he said as much to the ladies when making his *adieux*.

"You know what I want," he had said.

Prudence nodded.

"She is not yet eighteen," murmured Jacqueline.

Victor continued:

"She goes to Mauleverer House next month; I shall be at the *dépôt*, within easy range. I shall nip up. Mary Mauleverer is my good friend. Only a fool would rush in."

"She is not yet eighteen," murmured Jacqueline.

"And there is nobody else," said Prudence.

"You could trust her to me?"

"To no man sooner."

"I have not wasted my time. But it is not an affair of dropping the handkerchief."

With that he departed.

Before Rose was presented to her Sovereign, two things of some importance happened in Charminster. Derek, greatly to his surprise, was awarded the bronze medal of the Humane Society; and immediately afterwards Mr. Walkington offered to the hero a position in the bank at a salary larger than the one received before. Derek, to Rose's amazement, accepted the offer, and Mrs. Devenish furnished the reason.

"I can't let him go," she said to Rose. "There never was a better son. He hates office work, but he loves me."

To Rose herself Derek said curtly: "She's very weak. Dr. Pogany is not hopeful about her. You think I can't stick it here, because I've been away. That's just why I can. What I've been through will last me for a year or so."

Bit by bit, she learnt what he had been through, the details of the fight for his own hand. He had a knack of vivid description. He could make her see what he had seen, and feel what he had felt. If his language was at times racy of a new soil, she liked it the better for that. If he led her into strange places, excitement put to flight disgust.

We record scraps of talk to indicate the change in him—and her. The change was one of width; the depth might come later. He had seen life panoramically, mountains and mole-hills, giants and pigmies. He had learnt what the ordinary Englishman of his class so rarely comprehends—values. The work before the mast—shortening sail in a furious gale of wind, a fight to a finish with an iron-handed bully of the fo'c'sle, washing his own duds, swallowing vilely cooked food—these experiences had hardened body and mind. The work in California—loading and unloading timber upon the San Francisco wharves, beach-combing at Catalina, riding the ranges of a cattle-ranch, picking fruit in the San José Valley, logging in British Columbia, noting everywhere the relentless struggle of Man against Nature, facing doggedly the odds against him, beholding starvation round the corner—these had thrown up in astounding contrast the smug lives of the Charminster townspeople, their limitations, prejudices, and inanities.

"They know just enough to get in out of the wet," he said to Rose—"just enough to secure to themselves a little comfort upon which they set an inordinate value. That's a universal instinct which they share with the Siwash Indians and the Diggers. Beyond that—what? A fat-headed conviction that they're—as Mrs. Walkington puts it—Britannia's sons, and that they rule this world and will have a controlling interest in the world to come. If your Aunts had refused to receive me, I should have been 'cast as rubbish to the void.' Mrs. Hooton told me to try lemon-juice and eau-de-Cologne for my paws, so as to get them 'decent'! I showed her *that!*" He held up the fingers of both hands. The tips had a bluish-red appearance, as if recently healed after being seared by red-hot iron. "I told her how it happened."

"How did it happen?"

"Obstinacy on the part of our skipper. The beggar refused to take in sail with a squall coming up. It came up. We went aloft to find the royals tight as drums, and every sheet humming a tune of its own—the devil's own music, enough to make your hair stand on end to hear it. We pulled the canvas in inch by inch, holding on by our teeth and eyelashes, with the waves roaring under us and a sky black as pitch above us. When we went below every man's finger-tips were raw to the bone, but we didn't care. We had conquered."

"Did you ever feel home-sick?"

"Often. Action and reaction. Nobody escapes the weakness of the flesh, the longing for what you can't get, which grows into the determination to get it. When I was dog-weary I used to think of the old punting days. When I shut my eyes I could see you and the Aunts and the green cushions. I could smell the meadow-sweet and the honeysuckle."

"I lay in the punt last summer and read 'Back of Nowhere,' and thought of you."

"'Back of Nowhere'! To get somewhere, it's necessary to go to the back of nowhere. I'd like to read that book."

She told him about it, adding: "The man who wrote it lost his health, and his money, and the woman he loved."

"I wonder whether he found any of 'em again?"

"I don't know. Derek, are the people out West—the miners and cowboys and loggers—very wicked?"

He laughed gaily.

"Wicked? What do you mean by wicked? wickedness is relative. Some of the best men I've met, the bravest, the sincerest, swore like bargees and got drunk whenever they had the chance. They didn't know the virtue of a clean tongue.

They grinned at Death twice a day, and cursed him to his face. Mrs. Easter would have thought them wicked, but the Vicar, I fancy, would be more charitable."

"Manners don't count for much, I suppose, in mining-camps?"

"Manners count everywhere, even in the fo'c'sle of a sailing-ship. Cowboys have very good manners."

Rose would think over these talks, in the pretty room that had belonged to her mother. A thousand times she wished that she could go to a mother, and ask questions not to be put to Aunts. About this time, upon the eve of "coming out" (an amazingly apposite expression), she would lie awake speculating about marriage. She divined that her mother's marriage had been unhappy, because the Aunts never spoke of it. She knew, being singularly observant for her age, that marriage was not what some of the novelists paint it to be. And nearly all the fiction she had been allowed to read ended at the altar, with an unconvincing hint that happiness had been secured by the protagonists. She had come (very reluctantly) to the conclusion that Mrs. Easter had not made her parson happy. Mrs. Hooton, good, kindly creature, was not at her best and kindest in the presence of her Alfred. Mr. Devenish had been a brute to that thin, milk-faced little mother of Derek. Rose, of course, could not imagine a man ill-treating herself. She would soon "fix" him, to use one of Derek's American words.

But marriage, either sooner or later, bulked large in her future. The Aunts, you may be sure, held strong views on that. Marriage was the natural destiny of woman, and a certainty if she happened to be well-dowered and well-looking.

She began to ask herself: "What made women happy?" The Aunts were happy in a tepid, lavender-scented atmosphere of their own making. Certainly, they extracted pleasure out of simple things, which the Vicar said was so wise, beaming delightedly over their books, their embroidery, their china, and the babies of other folk, provided they were scrupulously clean. Perhaps the dislikes of the ladies interested their niece more than the likes. The odd increasing petulance in speaking of what displeased them challenged Rose's humour and curiosity, and sometimes provoked petulance in herself. Did this irritability indicate old age or a lack of intelligence? Aunt Prudence was clever in her way. She could speak admirably, always nice in her selection of the right word and phrase, and sometimes extraordinarily shrewd.

One day she mentioned this to Derek. He laughed heartily.

"Bless your innocent soul! Don't you know what's the matter with them?"

"No, I don't."

"They have no imagination. It's impossible to budge them from the Dower House and the tiny circle in which they live. And you must expect the circle to grow smaller, and their prejudices to increase."

"Derek—how dismal!"

"A big thing might wake 'em up—a sort of moral earthquake. They need startling. You know I never meet Mrs. Easter without longing to crawl up behind her, jump on her back, and shout in her ears: 'Bogy's got you.'"

"I understand; but that sort of thing would kill the Aunts."

"I should live in lively hope of their resurrection. Your Aunts ought to spend a month in a beleaguered city, amongst starving men and women, with buildings crashing about them. That would have a tonic effect."

"They are so good—such an example!"

Derek remained silent. Something in his face provoked Rose to ask outright: "Don't you think so?"

"An example of what? An example to whom?"

"To everybody."

"They are an example, I'll admit. They have an immense influence in Charminster, but, unless I'm stark mad, the influence is for evil rather than good."

"Derek!"

"I thought that would open your eyes. Now I must explain. Your Aunts are darlings—let's admit it, and have done with it. But what is the nature of their influence here? They turn aside from everything that offends them. They keep themselves and you in cotton-wool. The blinds are down; they ignore progress; they mistrust reform. In short, they deliberately shut their eyes and refuse to see things as they are, and dream placidly of things as they were. And because they're the Honourable Misses Mauleverer everybody understudies them. Your family and Lord Charminster's father kept the railway at arm's length, and all that a railway symbolises. If they had their way, the lower classes would remain in early Victorian ignorance. Instead of fostering growth, water-ing it with sympathy and encouragement, they're doing their passive best to retard and destroy it. All over England, in every provincial town, there are ladies like your Aunts, and men like that pompous ass Walkington, who opens windows at the bottom instead of the top. I asked Arthur yesterday if he didn't think that our heads needed ventilation rather than the calves of our legs, and he would have liked to give me ten days, without the option of a fine. Old Walkington plays second fiddle to your Aunts. If they called the right tune, he would fiddle to that. Example! Lord!"

"I feel so disloyal listening to you."

"What—rot! For Heaven's sake, face things! Don't play the silly ostrich. The loyalty worth having, like true courage, looks with calm clear eyes at the object which inspires it. And it remains loyalty after looking. Pretending to ourselves that the people we love are utterly different from what they really are is a sort of pampering of the mind—playing baby with yourself. Your father's daughter mustn't do that."

"I wish I knew more about my father."

Derek cursed his too nimble tongue.

"He was a pioneer, a pathfinder into the unknown."

"It must be fascinating."

"Very."

"You would like to do that?"

"Rather. And I shall some day."

"Become an explorer?"

"Not in the sense you mean. Somebody else can discover the South Pole. I shall explore—I am exploring—*minds*. I'd rather like to help in the ordering of energies. I'd like to eliminate some of the waste in human lives. It worries me horribly to see people floundering about, grabbing at this and that, holding tight on to the wrong thing."

"Would you like to get into Parliament?"

"They're floundering there. I can't tell you offhand where I'd like to specialise. That knowledge will come later. The demand creates the supply. At present I'm at work on the two people I care most for in the world."

"Your mother is one. Who is the other—yourself?"

"The other is—you."

"Thank you," she said demurely, not daring to meet his eyes. It was a dangerous moment for both. Derek still retained some Devenish restraints, which he might have scoffed at in others. He knew that Rose was encouraged to come to the cottage by her Aunts, because Mrs. Devenish needed her; and the son was fully aware how great that need was. To repay this trust by making love to a girl not yet eighteen, an heiress destined for somebody else, was unthinkable at this stage in his development. He continued firmly:

"You may do big things, Rose, if you choose; and then I shall say to myself, 'I opened her eyes first.'"

She murmured nervously:

"Am I as much as that to you? Next to your own mother?"

"Yes."

"I—I feel the same towards you, Derek. Your friendship has always been a big thing to me. And you have opened my eyes."

He gazed into them, and trembled at what he saw there. With a tremendous effort, and speaking in a different voice, he said curtly:

"Keep them open!"

Next week Rose went to London, accompanied by the ladies. Aunt Prudence once more fastened the pearl necklace round a white young throat, and Jacqueline remarked with dismay that the pearls seemed to have lost some of their lustre.

"They need light and air and warmth," said Prudence. "For many years they have lain in darkness at Charminster Bank."

"Pearls must be almost human," said Rose, as she kissed the ladies.

The Aunts returned to Charminster two days later, not in the best of spirits. The house seemed strangely empty, and they stood together in Rose's room with the tears in their eyes.

"We have done our duty by the child," said Prudence.

"Yes, Sister," replied Jacqueline.

Prudence hesitated.

"We shall be able to meet Rosetta without fear."

"It is a great comfort to feel that, Sister."

On the morrow they pursued the even tenour of their way, looking a little older, not hearing quite so well, and seeing even less than before.

We shall leave Rose at Mauleverer House, in safe custody. Events of importance demand our presence in Charminster. The Vicar, after much perturbation, was about to take a decisive step, being constrained to action after a confidential talk with Derek Devenish. The young man often dropped into the Vicarage after tea to smoke a pipe with the parson, and practise the art of speech. The parson supplied tobacco and an attentive pair of ears. He thought of Derek as typical—which he was—of the strange new generation—so inquisitive, so restless, so impatient of tradition and restraint. The parson was reckoned to be a good Conservative by his parishioners, simply because he belonged to the local organisation and could be relied upon to make a capital speech at short notice. He had passed through many political phases, beginning his career at Oxford as a Liberal (a secret hid from the Aunts) with leanings towards Socialism. At thirty he admitted candidly that he was disgusted with politicians, and most particularly with those whose tendencies were destructive. His wide reading confirmed him in the opinion that growth was necessarily slow, and that human institutions invited modification and amendment rather than wholesale reconstruction. Ultimately he became a Conservative in its essential sense—a conservator of energies, a director of them, apprehensive of dislocation and disintegration, and yet keenly alive to the possibilities of improvement in every direction.

Derek interested him enormously. The boy had "stuff" in him—the makings, possibly, of a big man. He attacked life boldly, elementally, building his ideas upon the solid rock of experience, the only foundation that endures. The smug young prigs of the Universities, pap-fed orators, amazingly clever, but immeasurably ignorant of life at first hand, each tooting his own penny trumpet, each listening impatiently to others upon the implied condition that he in his turn should be given a hearing, each echoing the jargon of the school of thought in which he had been trained, each grotesquely garbed in reach-me-down theories—these aroused his pity and contempt. Every man-Jack of them ought to be deported, made to serve an apprenticeship before the mast, or in a factory, or on a cattle-range—anywhere, everywhere, at home or abroad, upon the one condition that they learned to support themselves before posing as props for others. Props they were, in the theatrical sense, and in no other!

After Rose's departure, the Vicar marked a change in Derek. The boy had something on his mind. He began to air a cynicism which aroused the parson's curiosity. He looked rather fagged, as if kindly sleep had failed to repair the ravages of long hours spent in an ill-ventilated office. Finally, the parson asked abruptly:

"What's wrong with you, Derek?"

"Dare I tell you?" replied Derek, throwing back his head.

"You can tell me anything, my boy."

"Then, here goes! What I need is ten hours a day in the saddle, riding out a couple of horses, or another trip round the Horn."

"Drastic remedies. The disease must be serious."

"It is. I'm in love."

"Ah!"

"I knew it would come," said Derek reflectively, "and I knew that when it did come I should have a bad dose. I'm built that way. I've fought against it, but it's overpowering. I want her furiously. With some fellows of my age it's the flesh, with some the spirit or the intellect. With me, the attack seems to be simultaneous. Body, mind, and spirit are assailed. You can guess *who* it is ? "

The Vicar nodded.

" I believe I could make her care for me."

" It is probable."

" I can interest her and excite her."

He stretched out trembling hands, palm uppermost, displaying their emptiness.

" She has everything, and I have nothing."

" You don't think that, Derek ? "

" My thoughts play hide-and-seek with me. I can't think with detachment at all. If she had nothing, I could plot and plan. I see her hopelessly out of reach, hanging out of heaven, with a Green-jacket dangling in front of her, obscuring her view of me. What's inside that Green-jacket ? A better fellow than I am ? Her own sort ? Specially designed by Providence to be her mate ? These questions drive me mad "

" Have you answered any of them ? "

" He's a gentleman."

" And what else ? "

" The word as I use it means a lot ; it includes associations, traditions, a code to which I can't honestly subscribe. I frighten her at times. She winces when I land heavily upon some cherished convention. I have knocked some of the Mauleverer stuffing out of her. She quoted the Aunts to me as an example. I told her that to me they were a bad example, blind leaders of the blind."

The parson laughed. "You have an odd way of making love."

"I haven't tried to make love. I've rather overstated the case against myself. But the appeal I have for her lies in the fact that I'm different from the other men she has met."

"Just so."

"In three months she will be back again. Before then I must skip this town. But there's my mother."

"The biggest thing you have done yet, my boy, was going back into the Bank for her sake."

Derek got very red. "You do haul the truth out of a fellow," he groaned. "My motives were mixed. The Bank—confound it!—meant being near Rose, and seeing her every day. The duty to mother didn't shine out very brilliantly. Mother is stronger, likely to make old bones yet, so Pogany tells me. And she's beginning to worry about my future. She knows what the Bank means—drudgery, fetters, everlasting discontent."

"What would you like to do?"

"There are big chances in California. I have a thousand pounds of my own, and I've learnt how to hold on to it. They are striking oil all over the State. I should like to go back and work in the oilfields, waiting for my chance. Wages are good. There was an Englishman out there—a very quiet cove, who bought for a song the big dump-heaps of unworkable ore lying outside the gold-mines. He banked upon the conviction that some fellow would discover a process for reducing these low-grade ores. Some fellow did. And to-day that Englishman is a rich man. The same thing can be done with oil. Rockefeller is supreme for the moment, and the men who won't sell their wells at his price have to cap 'em—and wait. These capped wells can be bought cheap. It's a lock-up, but some day Rockefeller will be capped, or he'll die, and then the oil will gush out again."

"Sounds all right."

"It is all right. But there are other things—heaps of things. The possibilities hit you in the eye wherever you go."

"And if you should strike oil—what then ?"

"I'd make some wheels move more swiftly over here."

"Parliament ?"

"Perhaps."

"Derek, I must think this over. Go on with your work, and don't worry. I can't inflict platitudes upon you. My philosophy of life can be enclosed in a nutshell. Let every man do the nearest to his hand, and do it well. You're not wasting your time here. You're growing, and nothing else matters for the moment."

"I wonder what you would have said to me if I'd captured her ?"

The Vicar rose, and shook the ashes from his pipe.

"Don't press a fogy too hard ! I say this with conviction : I rejoice that you did not abuse what power you have over an inexperienced girl. No woman worth her salt was ever lost because her lover showed that he could exercise restraint for her dear sake."

"Thanks !" said Derek.

It was the parson who slept ill that night, humorously aware of his dislike to cut knots, instead of untying them. The knot could be cut by advising Derek to leave Charminster. Had he consulted his parishioners, such advice would have been unanimous from the more important members of his flock. He could fancy himself putting the question from his pulpit on Sunday morning: "Those in favour of the motion hold up their hands!" How the gloved hands would go up! In the gallery there might be dissentients—the Jills of Hog Lane held on tight to their Jacks.

Next day he wrote to Rosetta:

"MY DEAR MRS. NEWMAN,

"I am between the devil and the deep sea. Derek Devenish, who bears a striking resemblance to the son of my predecessor, has fallen deeply in love with our young lady, and made full confession to me. At a word, he would leave Charminster for California; and I dare not speak that word. Of all the young men I have met, he is most likely to advance in the true direction, provided that he can find the right woman to accompany him. He is a strong man, able to fight for his own, and to hold his own. In every other respect, he would be regarded as ineligible to marry Lord Brough's daughter. Charminster would be shaken to its foundations at the mere suggestion of a match so preposterously unsuitable. Twice he has worked his way round the Horn, before the mast. He can earn a good living anywhere. At the moment he is a clerk in the Walkington Bank.

"After much thought, I dare to suggest that you should come here, and make this young man's acquaintance. If sharp eyes—but, alas! there are no sharp eyes here—should detect some resemblance in you to a lady who died long ago, the matter would be dismissed without further comment. The 'Bell' is an excellent hotel, more or less full of visitors during the summer. Come alone, with perfect safety. What say you? The young lady is interested, no more. The young man has exercised remarkable restraint. As the widow of Paul Newman, you could select your acquaintances, and your privacy would be respected.

"The young lady does not return till the end of July.

"Ever yours sincerely,
"THOMAS EASTER."

Within three days the answer reached him. Mrs. Paul Newman would come alone to Charminster, and spend the month of June at the "Bell."

CHAPTER IX

ROSETTA RETURNS

CHARMINSTER was mildly fluttered when it became known that the widow of the author of " Mists " was staying at the " Bell." She was seen walking about the town, accompanied by a Yorkshire tyke, who took no notice whatever of other dogs. Mrs. Newman drew in water-colour, and made several sketches in the water-meadows which bordered the Char. She was tall and thin, and her hair was as grey as Miss Mauleverer's. Mrs. Hooton remarked that she dressed very plainly, but with distinction. The Vicar and Mrs. Easter called upon her at once. The Vicar's wife added that it was pleasant and gratifying to hear Mrs. Newman speak of her late husband and his work. Evidently they had been a most devoted couple, hardly ever separated. Literary people were rather queer. Poor George Eliot, for instance, who had " debased the moral coinage of the realm ! " What an illuminating phrase that ! Whose was it ? Oh yes, it would be quite the right thing to call, but Mrs. Newman had intimated with no uncertain voice that she had come to Charminster to rest. One could not call her shy, but she was unquestionably reserved, with the air of one who had loved and lost far from the "madding crowd."

The Vicar lent her some books. When they were alone Rosetta asked:

"Would you recognise me, Mr. Easter?"

He replied truthfully, "No."

She had changed very greatly. The brilliance was gone from her brown eyes, and the colour from her cheeks. The rounded contours of youth had vanished with them, leaving in their place noble austerities of line. In a subtile sense she had faded. A stranger would have found it difficult to divine her character, either from her quiet face or still quieter speech. She looked as if she had withdrawn from the hurly-burly, content to watch others with an aloofness which was not to be mistaken for indifference. The parson perceived that she must have suffered much, and she told him simply that this was the case. Her husband had been long subject to periodic attacks of pain, so bad that it had seemed as if the tiger were mauling him again. Rosetta concluded:

"The marks of his claws are on my face. I have no fear of being recognised. I shall meet my old friend, Laura Hooton, without a qualm."

The Vicar bowed.

"I have seen Derek Devenish. I could hardly wait till the Bank opened its doors; I was in Charminster High Street before nine yesterday morning, walking up and down, staring at every young man I met. I recognised him at once."

"He is very handsome."

"I care nothing for that. I can see that he is strong and honest. Quality shines out of his eyes."

"If you will lunch with us I can arrange that Derek should meet you."

"You never told your wife?"

"No."

"Wonderful man!"

It struck him that her soft voice might betray her, but she laughed, shaking her head.

"I used to speak too loudly. You can guess why. The carefully modulated tones of my sisters, their slow utterance, used to affect me with a defiant desire to shout. The shock to my husband's nerves, from which he never recovered, compelled me to alter the pitch and tone of my voice."

"Everything you tell me interests me so much."

She explained the change of name, the significant choice of "Newman" and "Paul," and she described the interview with Rose, at Bognor, long ago.

"It was a hard moment."

"I can believe it."

"I didn't kiss her. I didn't care. All the time I was quaking. I have often wondered whether Hester Prynne could have lived without little Pearl. When I turned my back on her, Mr. Easter, I knew that the bill had been paid. No judge, however inexorable, could have inflicted greater punishment."

He made a gesture of assent.

"I saw my sisters yesterday afternoon, walking together upon the high ground. They looked at me as I passed. Jacqueline smiled. That brought back so much! And it meant that I pleased her. She always smiled when she saw some stranger that appealed to her, but she never spoke without a formal introduction. Afterwards I walked back through Hog Lane, and saw the drawn blinds. It seems incredible that so many years have passed since I stood by the pond and realised what those drawn blinds meant. But my sisters are old women."

"They have been very happy."

"I saw that, too. Prudence has grown more serene, kindlier. Yes; I'll come to luncheon with pleasure. I should like to meet your children."

"Vere, as you know, is Rose's particular friend. Will next Sunday suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"My wife will write a note."

Before the Sunday came Mrs. Hooton and several other ladies had called or left cards. The only bookseller in the town displayed a row of Paul Newman's novels, and "Mists" was in brisk demand.

Mrs. Hooton was delighted to meet the widow of the celebrity.

"I collected autographs once," she admitted; "and I have some interesting specimens—that of the Queen of Song amongst them." As she mentioned this, Laura noticed that Mrs. Newman smiled, and the subtlety of the smile perplexed her. She wondered whether this quiet lady was satirical. Laura prattled on, speaking much of Charminster, and staring with frank interest at the stranger. She said presently: "You remind me of an old friend."

Her voice died away; the plump, pleasant face grew grave. Rosetta perceived that Laura would say no more, and impulse seized her to admit boldly the slight resemblance, and use it as a key to unlock confidence. She said reflectively:

"Of whom do I remind you, Mrs. Hooton? I have an object in asking."

"Of Rosetta Mauleverer, who married Lord Brough, the South African man."

"I thought so. You are not the first to notice the likeness."

"You are much older than my friend would have been." Then, very red, conscious of an indiscretion, she plunged deeper, making light of the fancied resemblance, which was what Rosetta wanted.

"The likeness is hardly perceptible. The colouring, the features, the voice are so different. I think it's the poise of the head, and a gesture of the hands."

"I once knew Lady Brough—in India."

"Indeed. I wish you could meet her daughter—the sweetest girl! She is with her cousins, Lord and Lady Mauleverer, for the season. I hear it is a fact that she is engaged to her cousin, Victor, the heir, you know. Poor Lord Mauleverer has no sons. Such a grief that must be! I have two dear little boys!"

"You say Miss Brough is engaged?"

"It is not published, but you may take it from me, Mrs. Newman, that it is so. A charming young fellow, so—so exactly right. He is in the Rifle Brigade, de-lightful manners. By the way, Rose Brough simply adores 'Mists.' There are passages in that sweet book—I hope you won't think me gushing, but I cried myself to sleep over it—there are bits, I say, which almost describe Charminster."

Rosetta nodded.

"There are so many Charminsters in our dear England. I was born here, and have lived here all my life. It is a privilege to be part and parcel of what is best in one's own country, is it not?"

"Best?"

"I'm sure you know what I mean. As one grows older the appeal of what endures becomes so strong. I love every stick and stone."

"I passed through a place called, I think, Hog Lane."

"My dear Mrs. Newman, did you? I am *so* sorry. It will taint your interest in our dear old town. Hog Lane! I never go near Hog Lane if I can possibly help it, and I refuse absolutely to consider it as part of Charminster. Unhappily, the Dower House, where my dear old friends the Misses Mauleverer live, is at the end of Hog Lane. When I drink tea with them I have to drive through Hog Lane, but I tell my coachman (thus Laura described the boy who drove the pony-carriage) not to spare the whip. Mrs. Walkington, the banker's wife, who has a pair of horses, instructs her coachman to go round. It means an extra mile."

Rosetta smiled.

She met Derek upon the following Sunday; and the young man informed her that he had just finished reading "Back of Nowhere."

"It's great."

"Hardly that, Mr. Devenish."

"It catches hold of one, Mrs. Newman. You see, I've been out there. I know what the back of the world is like. The odd thing is it believes it's the front. A cowboy once asked me if I knew London and Paris. I told him I knew London fairly well, and he replied quite sincerely, 'London is a nice little burg, but re—mote'!"

"I suppose it seemed remote to him."

"Exactly. I say, 'Back of Nowhere' is autobiographical, isn't it?"

"More or less."

"Perhaps it's indiscreet to ask such a question. Victor Mauleverer wouldn't ask any. Do you know him?"

"That, I hope, is a pleasure to come. The name Mauleverer unlocks all doors in Charminster."

"The doors with knockers kept dazzlingly bright. Ring and knock—and it will be opened unto you. There's no marching in unexpectedly."

He laughed joyously, as if the humours of Charminster appealed to him.

"Are you one of those burglarious spirits who like to enter houses without ringing and knocking?"

"I think I am, Mrs. Newman."

"You would burgle confidence?"

Her quickness surprised him, for the idea was in his mind at the moment. He nodded.

"If it can be got no other way. One wants to know things."

"Dear me! You are a bold young man."

"They are too timid in Charminster, too poisonously afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing. Living here is like watching a camp fire that is almost out."

"And you want to use the bellows?"

"I do; I do! They need oxygen. In our Bank—and everywhere else—the windows are open at the bottom. I mentioned Victor Mauleverer just now. Arthur Walkington, the banker's son, tries to understudy him. But Mauleverer is too right."

"What do you mean?"

"His rightness, you see, is not his own. He inherited it. His people have spent five hundred years in eliminating everything from their lives and thoughts that is wrong. The result is a sort of dull perfection, a stodgy self-complacency, not to be budged from its surroundings."

Rosetta smiled.

"You think a youth should spread his wings instead of preening them?"

"That's the whole matter in a phrase."

"Tell me more about the Mauleverers. Isn't there a niece?"

"Rather!" his eyes flashed with excitement at the prospect of letting himself go before a sympathetic stranger, who, unless her looks belied her, could be trusted. "Rose Brough, the daughter of Lord Brough."

"More Brough than Mauleverer?"

"Inwardly. I wish she was here. I should like her to meet you."

"That's very complimentary, but what do you know of me?"

"I know you're one of the elect."

"Elect?"

"That's my word for the few who can get outside the station of life in which they were born—the few who can stand upright in other people's shoes.

The Vicar is the only one in Charminster. Rose Brough owes a lot to him."

"Does she?"

"And she owes something to 'Mists.'"

"That is very pleasant to hear. What does she owe to you?"

Beneath her penetrating glance Derek blushed, but he replied lightly enough:

"I've opened her eyes a bit."

"To what?"

"To the fact that the Mauleverer standard does not wave over everything."

"Does she think that your ideas are right?"

"I have never claimed that my ideas are right. I only claim to have ideas, and I want to give them room to grow. Every Jack ought to have his beanstalk, and climb it. I've begun to climb mine."

"But isn't Jill rather young to climb with you?"

"She must climb her own stalk, not mine."

With that their first talk ended, leaving Rosetta prepossessed in the young man's favour. He reminded her amazingly of Septimus at his age. He took hold of things firmly but not too roughly. With all his boldness, he was modest enough. She wondered what impression he had made upon her sisters, wondering, also, whether he had attempted to exhibit himself to them other than what he was. Ever since the chance meeting with the ladies, Rosetta had desired to talk with them, to measure the changes, to enjoy the sound of their voices, to feel the soft touch of their wrinkled hands. An ocean of differences rolled between her and them, but love dared the journey. She longed to enter her old home, to sit beneath the limes upon the velvety lawn, to smell the pot-pourri which distilled so subtile an essence from the big Wedgwood jar near the Queen Anne cabinet.

The idea filled her mind that, given certain conditions, she might forget for a few minutes the long, weary years, and become the Rosetta of eighteen, and as such be able to meet Rose upon equal terms. Wandering by the Char, revisiting the haunts of her childhood, there had been instants of sweet forgetfulness. Once, upon a warm afternoon, she had fallen asleep not far from the old trysting-place. Waking up, still drowsy, she saw the placid Char reflecting faithfully, with the limpidity of such reflections, the tall elms of her old home. And immediately she had thought: "I have been asleep. I may be late for tea. I wonder whether Prudence will scold?" The mirage faded from her mind, as the breeze obliterated the image of the elms, but the miracle had been accomplished. Time had put back his clock. And if once, why not again—and again?

Happy chance gave her the opportunity she desired. Upon the Tuesday morning after meeting Derek she was sketching the Dower House as seen from the Char, the garden side so different from the prim front, which seemed to close its eyes superciliously upon Hog Lane. To the left of the lawn was a large green-and-white striped umbrella, beneath which the ladies were sitting. Jacqueline was embroidering, while Prudence read aloud. The air was warm and still, but not sultry. The freshness of June lingered yet upon the Ramblers; in the shade the dew still sparkled upon the lawn; the water-meadows were blazing with buttercups and daisies. From the place where Rosetta was sketching, the wild meadow seemed to meet the trim lawn, but a sunk fence—as Rosetta knew—divided the two. It was cunningly built, impossible to see till you nearly fell into it, but a formidable obstacle, quite enough to keep not too active trespassers at bay.

Rosetta stared at the garden and the two figures in it. The pleasaunce was delightfully ordered, an epitome of beauty never suffered to degenerate into luxuriance. The rigorous pruning of yew and cypress and rhododendron had been done so carefully and slowly that none but a gardener could have suspected the constant shears, the never-ending thinning-out, the art that concealed itself so artfully. Near the ladies was a rose-garden, with a sundial in the centre of it. Prudence had planned it during the summer succeeding the death of her father. During Rosetta's youth the rose-garden had looked too neat and formal. Such vagabonds as Dorothy Perkins had not been allowed to wander in it. Now Lady Gay and Dorothy strayed everywhere, like impudent children in a primly furnished drawing-room.

"Discipline is relaxed," thought Rosetta.

At this moment the tyke, busy amongst some furze bushes, bolted a rabbit. Loudly yapping, the tyke pursued. The pair crossed the meadow, and Rosetta perceived that the garden was likely to be invaded. Across the sunk fence leapt the rabbit; after him sprang the dog. Bunny found a burrow in the rhododendrons; the terrier found compensation in the sudden sight of Jacqueline's cat, spitting and blaspheming at the trespasser.

Rosetta hesitated for an instant. The tyke might tackle the tabby, and he was quite capable of snapping viciously at restraining hands. To the side of the sunk fence was a path, and a gate, generally unlocked during the daytime. Rosetta sped along this, calling to a dog too engrossed with the cat's shocking language to do anything except bark at it. The ladies had risen, obviously flustered. Jacqueline perceived the mistress of the dog, and hastened to meet her, exclaiming pantingly:

"Please come in, and get your dog."

"How dare you, sir!" exclaimed Rosetta.

At sound of her voice, Jacqueline started, and a bewildered expression came upon her face. The tyke scampered up to his mistress, and the situation was saved.

"Thank you," said Jacqueline. "You are quite out of breath."

"I saw that murder impended, so I ran."

"You must sit down and rest," said Prudence.

"It is Mrs. Newman, I believe," murmured Jacqueline.

Rosetta bowed, now at ease. The ladies blinked at her, approving the simple lines of her dress.

"Our friend, Mrs. Easter, spoke of you," exclaimed Prudence. "Pray sit down. Can we offer you any refreshment—a glass of lemonade?"

"No, thank you. I was sketching this side of your house from the tow-path."

"My sister Jacqueline draws in water-colour," said Prudence, as Rosetta took the chair indicated.

"I spoil much nice paper," said Jacqueline modestly. "Perhaps, presently, you will show us your sketch. I should be so interested."

The ladies smiled graciously. Laura Hooton had spoken of the stranger with enthusiasm. Prudence was saying to herself: "Yes, yes; Mrs. Newman is a gentlewoman; and she looks distinguished." Jacqueline was thinking at the same time: "When she spoke to her dog I was reminded of Rosetta."

Presently the three ladies sauntered together to the spot where Rosetta was sketching, pausing more than once to admire some familiar bit of landscape.

"From the high ground," said Prudence, "one has a charming view. Upon a fine day it is possible to catch a glimpse of the Channel."

"And if the wind is in the right quarter," added Jacqueline, "one is able to enjoy a sea-breeze."

Rosetta smiled. How many thousand times had her sisters spoken of the sea-breeze, and the high ground, where they walked at least four or five times a week! Then the sketch was duly admired, in phrases that dropped gracefully from the thin, delicate lips.

"I could not show you *my* drawings," murmured Jacqueline; "they are so dreadfully amateurish. Our dear sister, Lady Brough, had the talent denied to me, but unhappily we were unable to give her good teaching."

Prudence said softly:

"Mrs. Hooton told us that you had met Lady Brough in India."

"Yes," said Rosetta.

"Did she speak of her old home?"

"Often."

The ladies sighed. Jacqueline carried a small camp stool, which she opened. Prudence sat down upon it, and Jacqueline asked anxiously: "We didn't come too fast for you, Sister?"

"Certainly not." She explained curtly to Rosetta, in the voice that dismissed intimate matters as unseemly and irrelevant:

"My sister makes an absurd fuss over me." In her most courtly tone, she continued: "My health, Mrs. Newman, which is not quite so robust as formerly, precludes me from making calls, but if you would waive ceremony, and take luncheon with us to-day, we should be so pleased. You will have finished your drawing by then."

"You are very kind."

"It is you who will be kind. Please say 'Yes,' if you have no better engagement."

"I shall be delighted," said Rosetta, and Jacqueline wondered vaguely why the pale cheeks of this interesting stranger were perceptibly flushed.

"We lunch at one. Will you come in through the garden?"

After a decent interval the sisters retired, to make—as Rosetta well knew—some slight additions to the midday meal. Jacqueline would be sure to mix a salad, and Prudence would despatch Crump to the cellar for a bottle of Barsac. Fresh flowers would be gathered, and the best silver would shine softly upon one of the thick, ancient table-cloths, woven with the de Clancy arms.

The ladies walked in silence till they had regained the sanctuary of the garden. As they were crossing the lawn Jacqueline asked quietly:

"Sister, does she remind you of anybody?"

"There is something about her face and voice. I have been searching my memory, but fruitlessly."

" She reminds me of Rosetta."

Prudence considered this reflectively.

" Yes, there is—something. That explains the appeal. I have seldom felt so drawn towards a stranger. And her drawing——! She portrayed our home so tenderly, as if she cared about the things which are dear to us."

They entered the house, and summoned Crump.

At luncheon ordinary topics were discussed, and dismissed when they threatened to become interesting. But Rosetta remarked that Time seemed to have softened the judgment of her sisters, or had they become too indolent to exercise it ? The serene light of evening glowed in their pale blue eyes. They appeared to be moving gently to eternal rest, willing to lie down when the hour came, but placidly desirous of making the most of the hours that might yet remain.

Rosetta was aware that Crump eyed her with wrinkled interrogation. The aged handmaiden had become a privileged person. She spoke to Prudence with authority, and aroused protest, when she brought in two cups of black coffee instead of three.

" If I had brought a cup for you, ma'am, you would have taken it."

" She is an old servant and friend," said Jacqueline to Rosetta. " My sister has a weakness for strong coffee, which is so bad for her. Crump has been with us for forty years. Once we ruled her, and now she rules us."

To Rosetta's surprise, Prudence nodded amiably, glancing regretfully at the forbidden beverage.

The coffee had been served in the inner drawing-room, and Rosetta saw that her portrait hung in the place of honour which, in her day, had been occupied by the Reynolds' kit-cat of Miss Prudence de Clancy. The youthful face smiled down upon her, as she wondered amazedly: "Was I ever like that?"

"A speaking likeness," murmured Jacqueline. "You recognise it, of course?"

"Yes."

The Sisters smiled at each other, and that smile helped to reward the mother who had given up her child. It was illuminating in its radiant tenderness.

"This is Rose's latest photograph," said Jacqueline.

She placed in Rosetta's hand a large framed example of the best London work.

"It does not do the child justice," remarked Prudence. "Her beauty lies in her expression."

"She must have a strong will," said Rosetta.

The ladies raised their eyebrows. The remark seemed to them not quite complimentary. Jacqueline said hastily:

"The child has not indicated that, Mrs. Newman. Ever since God sent her to us she has deferred in all things to our judgment. So far as I can recollect we have never had occasion to punish her. Once, indeed——"

She paused, glancing at Prudence, who said smilingly: "Go on, my dear, the incident of the riding-switch will amuse Mrs. Newman."

So the story of the two cuts was told with soft chucklings, and Prudence, staring meditatively at her pink, wrinkled palm, added:

"My sister struck uncommonly hard."

"We came downstairs," Jacqueline continued, "apprehensive that our china might be attacked, and we found Rose on her knees in front of her mother's picture. After that, we found occasion to leave her alone in this room whenever she had been naughty. Her dear mother never died for her."

The words were hardly audible, but they echoed in Rosetta's heart. To hide her agitation, she rose, and stared at the portrait, trying to realise what it had meant to her child. She went away soon afterwards, promising to come again, and leaving behind the morning's sketch.

After she had gone Jacqueline said to Prudence:

"A woman of rare sympathy and feeling! When I told her that story of little Rose the tears were in her eyes."

"Perhaps," answered Prudence, "she has lost a child."

CHAPTER X

DEREK LEAVES CHARMINSTER

DEREK, meanwhile, went on meditating flight. To make this easier and inevitable, the work at the Bank became daily more irksome and disagreeable. The young man was directly under Arthur Walkington, an insufferable spark at most times, but never more so than when glowing with authority. Derek never saw Arthur's smooth pink face, with its slightly protuberant eyes, without wishing to hit it, and, unhappily, he had not yet learnt to disguise his feelings. Arthur Walkington, for his part, was well aware that his father's clerk eyed him ironically from tip to toe with an expression aggressive and critical. Arthur was aware, also, that Derek's name might be found in the Book of Books, as a cadet of a family whose head ranked as a belted earl. One day, young Lord Charminster had come into the Bank and said, with an extraordinary lack of any sense of the fitness of things:

"Hullo, Devenish!" to which Derek replied: "Hullo, Charminster, how goes it?" Afterwards Arthur had deemed it his duty to say to his subordinate:

"You rather forgot yourself this morning, Devenish."

"Never! I forget many things and persons, but not myself."

"You treated Lord Charminster as if he were your equal."

"He can't complain of that. If I don't choose to assert my superiority you ought to applaud my modesty."

Arthur turned from pink to red. In these little encounters he was uncomfortably aware that Derek had the best of it. Nevertheless, his opinion upon what was right and proper inside his father's bank being solidly based upon ignorance of most things outside it, he was able to retort:

"We don't like that sort of thing."

"Did you see his lordship wince?"

"He is too much of a gentleman to betray his feelings."

Derek's eyes sparkled. He had played much cricket with the most important depositor in the Charminster Bank, and at that moment happened to have a note in his pocket—a note of some face value when presented across the counter.

"Honestly, Walkington, do you think that Lord Charminster was annoyed by my familiarity?"

"Honestly, I do."

"Then how do you account for this?"

He presented the note:

"Dear Derek,

"Do you think you could get short leave in July and come to me for my cricket week? Also, I want to hear all about your adventures, and to swap a few yarns with you. While you were in California I put in a year in India.

"Ever yours,
"C."

"Heaps coals of fire on my head, doesn't he?" said Derek.

Arthur Walkington replied stiffly: "I see no reason to alter my opinion."

"Reason," said Derek, not quite so pleasantly, "would not alter your opinion." He continued, maliciously: "Is there anything disgraceful about this business?"

"Disgraceful?"

"Anything to be ashamed of in polishing my breeches on one of your stools? One loses caste, I know, sweeping crossings—why, I don't pretend to explain—but banking and brewing are exceptions, aren't they? A great-aunt of mine married one of the Wildes, and the family was quite pleased when my cousin Fanny became engaged to a Bargus."

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Arthur, sulkily.

"Simply this: If you consider my position here to be menial, why, then, I take it, I ought to 'my lord' Charminster, even if he happens to be a pal of mine."

Arthur thought that he saw a way out of the wood. "You may not be aware," he said loftily, "that officers on parade address their seniors as 'Sir.'"

"That argument would wash well enough if you had your facts complete. A captain, on parade, addresses his subaltern as Mr. So-and-So. Lord Charminster, who happens to be my junior, did not address me as Mr. Devenish. Had he done so I should have been punctilious in observing the formalities."

Arthur had the last word, as he turned on his heel. "When you answer that note," he said acidly, "you can inform your friend that we are too busy to spare you during July."

"Oh, damn!" said Derek.

After this mild passage at arms, relations between the young men became strained, and, from Mr. Walkington's manner, Derek was able to divine more unpleasantness to come. However, he grinned pleasantly when he was snubbed, and did his work thoroughly, comforting himself with the reflection that the world was wide, with plenty of room in it for strong young men.

He had met Rosetta several times, with an ever-increasing sense of intimacy and pleasure, and, of course, he confided to her sympathetic ears that banking was not exactly his vocation.

"What keeps you here?" she asked.

He replied frankly: "Two women."

"Two?"

"My mother is one."

Rosetta's brown eyes, which had long lost their fire, smouldered dimly, and the colour flowed into her thin cheeks. Derek thought: "By Jove! she must have been a beauty once!" And he saw that she mutely invited his confidence.

"The other, Mrs. Newman, is a young lady whom you have never met. I ought," he continued desperately, "to cut and run from her, but

I can't. She—she's a ward in Chancery—has money and all that. What do you think the Lord Chancellor would have to say to me?"

"It is more exciting, isn't it, to speculate upon what the young lady would say first?"

She spoke quietly, wondering whether her beating heart would betray her. The Vicar had been unable to give information upon the point of Rose's feeling for Derek.

"The young lady is very young, and quite able to pick and choose. She likes me as a friend. She hasn't a ghost of an idea of what I feel about her."

"Don't be too sure of that!"

"I do feel sure. Also there's another fellow staked out for her—a good chap, too. I've spoken of him—Victor Mauleverer, one of the victors who win big prizes without much effort."

"Now I can guess the young lady's name."

He blushed.

"It makes it easier not to mention it."

This delicacy appealed to her; she nodded, keeping her eyes upon his face. Derek went on seriously:

"Pressure will be brought to bear. That's what tears me. Pressure of the subtlest sort—persuasive kisses, sighs, tender touches of the hand. If the war should break out——"

"War must break out."

"If Mauleverer was ordered to the front he might have a fighting chance."

Rosetta smiled.

"Mr. Victor Mauleverer, you think, must seek reputation as a lover at the cannon's mouth."

"I believe a V.C. or even a D.S.O. might do the trick."

Then Rosetta said abruptly:

"Can you write as well as you talk, Mr. Devenish?"

"Write, Mrs. Newman?"

"A gift for vivid description, and such experiences as you have had, are assets of value. Does journalism appeal to you?"

He considered this, with brightening eyes, beholding himself as war correspondent, a rival for reputation with the other fellow.

"I've no pull, you see."

"I know one or two editors. If you can write stuff salted to the palate of the town I might be able to help you."

"By Jove!"

"You seem to like the idea."

In some excitement he made confession. He had written one or two things—sea sketches, fo'c'sle yarns—never shown to a soul as yet. Would Mrs. Newman be kind enough to glance at them? Hardly waiting for her reply, he went on with enthusiasm:

"A job of that sort would square my circle. My mother could leave this and go to London. She would be glad to get out of Charminster. Everybody here knows her story, and she daren't look her friends in the face, poor darling!"

His voice softened delightfully, confirming Rosetta in her opinion that he was a good son, able to understand and sympathise with the weakness of a woman—a rare quality in youth. That night she read the sketches. When she met him again her voice was full of encouragement.

"The stuff *is* there. All you need is constant practice. What does Mrs. Devenish say?"

"She's keen as mustard."

In a more practical tone Rosetta set forth the possibilities. Derek must begin, of course, at the lowest rung in the ladder, and master conscientiously the elementary principles of his craft.

"I'll work like a nigger."

"Niggers don't work very hard, do they?"

He laughed joyously, stretching out his strong arms, eager to embrace the world.

"How I've been cramped!"

"You won't be very free in London. There are Arthur Walkingtons in all newspaper offices."

"But I shall look out."

"I'll write to a certain editor to-night. If he offers you a reporter's billet, you must keep it."

"I'll keep it," said Derek grimly.

Next day she drank tea with the Sisters, who made no effort to disguise the pleasure her society afforded them. From a slight colour in their cheeks Rosetta guessed that something of importance had taken place. Jacqueline was restless till she disclosed the secret. The "child" was coming home for three days, escorted by the heir of the Mauleverers. Rosetta's voice was not quite so firm, as she asked:

"Am I to infer anything?"

"We don't know what to infer. Rose would be the first to tell us. He has been running up to town lately."

"We want you to meet the child," said Prudence. Then she added: "And she wants to meet you. We have attempted to describe you. 'Mists' made a great impression. We said that you were leaving at the end of the month, and we were not expecting Rose to return much before Goodwood."

"I may stay on a little longer."

"Our fine air has done you good, Mrs. Newman. It is relaxing, so I have been told, in the Lake district? Just so. A change is expedient. We go to Bognor every August."

"At Bognor, long ago, I had a glimpse of your little niece."

She described the incident, which seemed to excite the ladies. Jacqueline recalled it tearfully:

"To be sure! The child came in and told us that a friend of her mother's had spoken to her. I had to leave the room."

Prudence nodded solemnly. The Sisters had remarked to each other that Mrs. Newman possessed the portentous power of evoking confidence. She lured it from locked hearts with soft, appealing eyes and pretty gestures. Jacqueline continued nervously:

"Was our sister unhappy when you knew her?"

As she spoke she glanced at Prudence, dreading a frown, but Prudence nodded again, with increased solemnity.

"Yes," said Rosetta. "Few were aware of it, but I was one."

"The dear saint!" ejaculated Jacqueline. With another glance at Prudence, she went on hurriedly: "We did not know; we never suspected; the marriage was not all we could have wished."

"It was not," said Rosetta.

"Mary Mauleverer told us as much in this very room. Yes, we think of her as saint and martyr, the best and most courageous woman that ever lived."

Rosetta moved uneasily, but the faintest of smiles flickered round her lips as the fact of her canonisation sank into her mind. Taking silence to mean assent, Jacqueline rushed into further confidence, painting the dead Rosetta with the prismatic colours of fancy, and—like the early Italian masters—gilding the outlines with finest gold, untarnishable by Time. This revelation of herself as saint was even more distressing to Rosetta than reading her obituary notices. As the intimate friend of the dead lady, what could she do but stare unprotestingly at a portrait which bore no resemblance to the original? She beheld herself enshrined, an object of worship for two elderly ladies and a young girl, a Madonna immaculate and inviolate!

She could have wept or laughed. The strange inconsistency of human nature inclined her, perhaps, to laughter. Her sisters had forgotten their own flesh and blood, substituting in its place an elusive spirit compounded of all the virtues. She had risen from the dead—perfection—to remain for ever on a pedestal.

She trembled, for some savage instinct urged her to tear down the graven image, to roll the saint in the dust. Love, as a sunbeam, shone through a tiny hole in the blinds of the Sisters, transmuting that dust into powdered gold. As these thoughts rushed in and out of her mind, she heard Jacqueline's voice, recreating an impossible Rosetta and rejoicing over the recreation.

They had not changed. No sense of true proportion or perspective had come to them. Their passion for what they held to be good and beautiful was intensified. And their detestation of evil and ugliness must have intensified also.

She went away very sad, the penance of unmerited praise heavy upon her soul.

Outside, the sun was shining with oppressive splendour. The air was heavy and languorous as Rosetta walked slowly towards Charminster, through Hog Lane. The Sisters had urged her to go by the Char, and she had refused to do so, because the trim, smiling landscape would be sure to exasperate her. She was approaching the "John Barleycorn," and the loafers about the bar entrance eyed her with interest, wiping thick, thirsty lips, mouthing a husky appeal to benevolence. Rosetta marked them, beholding their coarse, swinish faces, their heavy misshapen bodies, smelling the reek of stale beer, hearing the inarticulate grunting. She tried to measure what sensual indulgence was to them. Did it mean everything? Did it mean oblivion?

She thought with a shudder of their wives and children.

Derek was approaching the tavern, swinging along with his long, easy strides.

"You here?"

"And why not?"

That had remained a favourite expression ever since childhood. The sharpness of it had always disconcerted the Sisters. For an instant it disconcerted Derek. Then he understood.

"The reek does go up to heaven, doesn't it?"

"And too many of us blame heaven for it."

"I'm not one of those idiots, Mrs. Newman."

He turned to walk towards the town with her.

They were interrupted by a shrill, discordant voice proceeding from what at first sight seemed to be a bundle of ragged and dirty clothes, crowned by a hat which two years ago had cost four shillings and elevenpence.

"This what you call work?" demanded the voice.

One of the loafers replied hoarsely: "'Tis you, Annie, I do declare. What be you mumbudgetting round here for?"

The other loafers snickered, as the dehumanised bundle of rags answered fiercely:

"I be come to fetch home an idle, ale-swillin' fool!"

"You was glad enough to marry me, dearie."

"May God A'mighty and my children forgive me for that. Think I took ye for a chimbley ornament?"

The men snickered again, arousing wrath in the husband. He clenched a huge fist, and bore down upon his wife, who faced him valiantly. She was a small, thin woman, with bright, feverish eyes, and he a giant, twice the size of Derek Devenish.

"Walk on quickly," said Derek, in a low voice to Rosetta; "and please don't look back. I can take care of myself."

Rosetta obeyed. She had perceived a brutal glare in the navvy's bloodshot eyes. He meant to strike his wife, and the other men meant to look on. She heard Derek saying quietly, "Now, my man, none of that," and the hoarse answer, "Better shift, young man, or I'll do for ye with my boot."

Rosetta wondered whether there was a constable further on. She quickened her pace, but glanced over her shoulder. As she did so, the woman overtook her, saying, breathlessly:

"Tom'll kill 'un. There bain't none can stand up agen' Tom. Time and time I've prayed that he might be licked once."

"Prayers are answered sometimes," said Rosetta.

"They're at it," said the woman. "Us had better stay and watch on."

Rosetta wanted to run. Violence in any form was abhorrent to her. She peered the length of Hog Lane hoping to perceive a stalwart guardian of the peace; as she did so she heard a dull, crunching blow, and a sharp exclamation from her companion:

"Well, I never!"

The navvy had rushed in, swinging a vigorous right arm. Derek ducked, jabbed the big fellow under the chin, and as his head went up, struck again, landing square on the point of the jaw.

"That's over," said Derek, staring at his bleeding knuckles. He glanced at the prostrate giant. "When he comes round," he said to the other men, "tell him that I'll half kill him the next time if I hear of his ill-treating his wife."

Some wives are expected to attack those who assail their lords and masters; this wife was an exception. She curtsied as Derek approached, and said gratefully:

"Thank you, sir. I'll never let 'un 'ear the last o' this, and you, seemin'ly, not 'arf 'is size neither!"

"Sorry this had to happen before you," said Derek to Rosetta.

"I am glad," Rosetta replied. After a moment's hesitation, she added firmly: "The man who can protect the wives of other men is likely to cherish his own."

The incident, however, had a sequel, for a garbled version of the encounter happened to reach the august ears of Mr. Walkington. A clerk of his had been brawling in Hog Lane. That was enough—more than enough—to frighten depositors. He sent for Derek next morning, and Arthur assisted at that unforgettable interview. Father and son were pinker than usual, and the small eyes of the banker blinked furtively, as if he were trying not to see a very present fear that hovered about his ripe rotundities. Mrs. Walkington, nodding portentously behind a large silver urn, had bade her husband at breakfast to be careful in his dealings with a wild young man, who had thrashed his own father. To this the banker replied "Tut!" Nevertheless, he had asked Arthur to be present.

The interview took place in Mr. Walkington's private room. The Charminster Bank, known as "Old Bank" (to distinguish it from a younger institution of much less importance) faced High Street with smug modesty, bashfully retiring, as it were, from a large linen-draper's establishment and a grocer's shop on each side of it. Periodical "white sales" caused the brick bank to blush perpetually; and young women flattening and cooling their noses against immense sheets of plate glass could behold, out of the corner of their eyes, a many-paned window behind which the banker bulged largely sitting at an immense mahogany desk and writing with a quill pen of ultra-respectability. To the right of the window was the main entrance, and to the right of that again were two windows which illuminated very insufficiently the large, low room in which the clerical business of the bank was carried on. When these windows were opened at the bottom, stout house-wives buying kippers exposed for sale outside the grocer's could peep in and watch with awe a dozen young men at work. The young men could smell the kippers from nine to five—when the wind was in the south-west—and inhale content with the reflection that they were exalted above the common herd.

Derek had always loathed this big, dingy room, with its solid, old-fashioned appointments, and its fusty smells, and its smug air of superiority to the shops that flanked it. The nicely graduated smile of the cashier irritated him; the man's bland voice, whenever he greeted an important depositor, so different from the sharp words of command flung at his subordinates, never failed to provoke acidity of mind. The other clerks were in the bank and of it, and could never get out of it (poor devils). They could contrast their position with that of the counter-jumpers in frock-coats next door, and devoutly thank Providence for His merciful goodness. Derek did his work better than they did, possibly because he knew that it would not endure for ever.

"What is this I hear, Mr. Devenish?" began Mr. Walkington.

"Good morning," said Derek, with the malicious intent of teaching the banker better manners. Father and son developed a deeper tinge of pink.

"I am told that yesterday afternoon you were brawling in Hog Lane with a drunken navvy."

"You have been misinformed, sir."

"Were you, or were you not, fighting outside the 'John Barleycorn' tavern?"

We hold no brief for Derek as a clerk in Old Bank. He ought, of course, to have explained civilly that he was protecting a half-starved woman against the brutal assault of her husband. This, however, he was in no humour to do.

"I knocked down a man," he said, quietly. "And I regret——"

"Ha! You regret? Well, sir, I regret, we regret——" he glanced at his son, as Derek interrupted:

"My regret, sir, is possibly not on all fours with your regret. I am sincerely sorry that there was no fight. I should have enjoyed hammering the blackguard. As it is, I cut my knuckles and slightly strained the tendon of my wrist."

Mr. Walkington flew the magenta, advertised next door as the fashionable colour of the hour.

"Have you anything more to say, young man?"

"Only this—that I wish to leave the Bank as soon as it will be convenient to you."

Mr. Walkington pulled himself together. "That will be this morning, sir."

"I am much obliged," said Derek imperturbably. "Gratitude has been defined as a lively sense of future favours to come. I look for no favours from you, sir, but I am grateful for the kindness and courtesy which I have not received, and take leave of you with whole-hearted satisfaction."

He bowed smilingly, and went out. Arthur had taken the precaution to leave the door of his father's private room wide open, so that the other clerks might derive benefit—and perhaps pleasure—from a snubbing about to be administered to an audacious and impudent servant. As Derek left the room, snickers of discreetly suppressed laughter were audible in the clerical department.

CHAPTER XI

ROSETTA AND ROSE

Rosetta was now unable to think of anything except her approaching meeting with Rose. Hourly, she became sensible of an increasing passion of tenderness and love. Lying awake at night, she could recall with poignant vividness the birth of her child, which so nearly had exacted her own life. And to-day pangs tormented her excruciatingly, because the child once more must be torn from her body.

She had come to Charminster cherishing the hope that she might be acknowledged as Rose's mother. But every interview with her sisters had deepened the conviction that time held no such solace in trust for her. She had prayed that they might change, that in the evening of life light might shine upon them with kindlier ray. She found them, where she had left them, in the soft shadows of the garden, sheltered by a vast umbrella!

Her life with Septimus had been far from happy, although they had loved each other faithfully. The past poisoned it. Success came too late to a broken and disappointed man. Ill-health made him irritable and morbid. She had accepted this as part of her punishment in breaking the Seventh Commandment, but it had scarred her as the tiger had scarred Septimus. Each was aware that the other had been mauled, that the marks must remain, that the wounds from time to time would break open afresh. Each, also, had expected much of life, born with an immense capacity for enjoyment or pain; and pain had been their portion.

Rosetta, for her part, had not rebelled against this, being essentially passive of character, but suffering brought premature wrinkles and grey hair. The knowledge that things had gone wrong became, perhaps, more intolerable as the years passed, as the sense of futility possessed her. Unhappily, this same sense had obsessed Septimus in regard to his work. It was so nearly exactly right, that demons tore him whenever he reflected that it was not quite right. His appeal failed to be supreme because of his physical disabilities. He had set forth the seamy side with convincing pathos and realism, but the critics—and everybody else—clamoured for more sunshine. The books written after "Mists" were brought forth with anguish. Unable adequately to satisfy others, it became increasing difficult to satisfy himself. He tore up and re-wrote innumerable chapters, and when the last proofs were revised collapsed from exhaustion. During these periods, Rosetta honoured all drafts upon her devotion and courage, wondering when she would collapse also, bled white by so constant a drain upon her vitality.

And then came his last illness and death.

The end—with what thankfulness she reflected on this!—had been calm and easy. She perceived how sorry he was to leave her, and yet how willing to go. Towards the last, he had spoken much of her future, urging her to return to Charminster, and to begin again.

To begin again!

Was it possible to begin again? In the garden at the Dower House under the cedars and limes that had remained the same the possibilities quickened. In the drawing-room, gazing at her portrait, beholding herself as saint and martyr, she had known the hope to be moribund. At a subsequent visit, Jacqueline had shown her some of the china in the marqueterie cabinet. There was a French snuff-box that had belonged to a de Clancy. When you touched a spring, a tiny enamelled bird sprang from the box and trilled delightfully. To Rosetta as a child, this box had been magical. She could just remember the time when she believed the bird to be alive, and pitied it shut up in a box. It sang so joyously, because it was set loose.

She said to Jacqueline:

"Is that, by any chance, one of those snuff-boxes that hold a singing bird?"

"To be sure," replied Jacqueline. "My great-uncle bought it, the extravagant fellow, and gave it to my mother. Rosetta used to love it, and every Sunday for years we would get it out for little Rose."

"Will you get it out for me?" asked Rosetta.

"With pleasure."

But, alas! something had gone wrong with the spring. The bird refused to leap from its prison, and Jacqueline said sorrowfully:

"I fear it will sing no more." With one of her whimsical ideas she added: "It knows that we have no children."

Rosetta whispered: "It will sing again for Rose's children."

Jacqueline's face brightened. She pressed Rosetta's hand, and only modesty prevented her from murmuring: "Sometimes I can see and feel the darlings."

Rose arrived on the Friday following Derek's encounter with the navvy, and on the Saturday morning she saw Rosetta, who had been invited to luncheon and requested to come early. Mother and daughter met upon the lawn, clasped hands, and gazed at each other. Rose's first impression was that of beauty, a subtile spirituality, which seemed to shine out of the pale tired face. Rosetta recognised the eyes and smile of little Rose, and fed hungrily upon these. The voice was quite unfamiliar.

"Please sit down, Mrs. Newman, I do so want to talk with you."

They talked of many things during that first half-hour; and Rosetta noticed that Victor Mauleverer was not mentioned; nor did Rose's glance stray in his direction. He sat with the Aunts, and Rosetta could hear his nicely modulated voice, never raised too loud. And then Crump announced luncheon.

In the middle of the meal, Victor asked carelessly:

"How is your sailor-man, my dear Rose?"

"Yes; how is Derek?" Rose, in turn, demanded of Aunt Jacqueline; but, as she mentioned his name, Prudence answered with austerity:

"I regret to say he has left the Bank. I understand that his mother and he are leaving Charminster."

"Oh!" Rose exclaimed.

"I have taken their cottage," said Rosetta.

To the Sisters this was news of great interest, and they discussed it with animation, welcoming Mrs. Newman as a neighbour. Rose listened to Victor Mauleverer with absent-minded indifference, and Rosetta kept wondering: "Does she care? Is it friendship? Or something deeper?"

The half of her that was Mauleverer approved of Victor. Partly prejudiced against the young fellow, she had to admit his charm of manner and appearance. The ladies fussed over him without making him look foolish or awkward. His smile would have disarmed a Malay running amok, and his voice had insinuating inflections. Without any question he was head over ears in love. He had reached the stage of the disease when it is stupid to hide it, and perhaps painful. All his pals knew how things were with him; and the rest of the world didn't matter.

"Can we have tea on the river?" asked Rose.

"Aren't we too large a party, my dear?" replied Jacqueline.

"We can get Derek and his punt. With two punts we shall have more room than company." She turned to Rosetta: "As you are taking their cottage, I expect you know the Devenishes?"

"I do."

"He is a brave young man," said Prudence, "but rather—violent."

"In the defence of women—yes," replied Rosetta.

Rose glanced up with sparkling eyes, but said nothing. The talk meandered back to the river and the weather. Rosetta found it difficult to believe that the scene was real. The easy chatter, the pleasant atmosphere, the serene, smiling faces of the Sisters, the intimate allusions to which, perforce, she must present a blank countenance, filled her with the sense that she was an onlooker at a nicely mounted drawing-room comedy. She kept on saying to herself: "That is my child opposite, but I'm an outsider, out of it all for ever and ever." She wished that she had died upon the day that Septimus was buried. It was difficult also not to stare too persistently at Rose, not to glut her starving vision with an inordinate surfeit. The sense of possession deepened; the words "mine—mine—mine" repeated themselves dully in her brain. Afterwards she wondered what power had enabled her to eat, and drink, and laugh, to say in reply to a question of Jacqueline's: "Yes, I like plenty of oil in my salad," or "I quite agree that peas cannot be gathered too young," while Rose prattled gaily of the latest play and the Royal Academy.

In the drawing-room, with Rose beside her, she sipped her coffee, looking up at her own portrait, which seemed to smile ironically. Rosetta thought: "I was never really like that." Rose, watching her face, and thinking how sad it was, murmured: "My mother must have been one of the happiest creatures in the world when that was painted."

"I wonder whether she knew it? At her age I didn't know it. And when a portrait was done of me long ago, I can remember quite well practising a smile in my looking-glass, so as to impress the artist with the conviction that I was happy."

Rose considered this attentively:

"We have a better time. Everybody admits it. My life, Mrs. Newman, has been extraordinarily happy. This old world has always seemed so young and jolly to me."

"The world, my dear, is as old as the eyes that behold it."

"Isn't that in 'Mists'?"

"Yes; my husband said it was the platitude of platitudes, so glaringly obvious that most of us ignore it."

"It will be heavenly on the river this afternoon," remarked Rose, with apparent irrelevance.

Rose manœuvred cleverly in the accomplishment of her purpose; and at four Derek punted up to the Dower House, and joined the party on the lawn. He looked his best in flannels. Victor greeted him pleasantly, and said critically:

"Jove! What a forearm!"

"Hauling on ropes," exclaimed Derek, with a laugh. "Nothing like it."

Rosetta saw that Prudence glanced with pursed-up lips at the injured knuckles. Her gracious smiles were for Victor. He had donned flannels also, of a finer cut and quality than Derek's, not white but cool grey. He played his part with ease and finish, a charming *jeune premier* expressly designed to wear the inconspicuous uniform of the most select regiment in the service.

Derek punted Jacqueline and Rosetta; Victor, no novice with a pole, took charge of Rose and Prudence. When the stream widened below Charminster, Derek proposed a race. Victor agreed lazily. To the astonishment of the ladies, the less powerful young man won, although not without a struggle. Skill, as Rosetta perceived, vanquished strength. The race was very short, but at the end of it Derek appeared flushed by his exertions, while the soldier had not turned a hair. He explained modestly that he had been a wet bob at Eton.

"He can do things," thought Rosetta.

Derek accepted defeat not quite gracefully; and the difference between the training of Eton and a grammar-school just peeped out.

"I'd have overhauled him in another hundred yards," he growled. Jacqueline made things easier by remarking: "Our punt is the lighter of the two, I think." Then Derek laughed, recovering his good-humour:

"It's not that. He is the better man."

"At punting," murmured Rosetta.

After the race, the young men sat down and paddled, while the ladies lay back upon the cushions. The punts glided down the Char, which seemed in no hurry to reach the sea. The sun had enticed from the water-meadows elusive spirits of the mist, who seemed to cast enchantment upon the landscape. The cattle lifted their heads, a cow-bell tinkled in the distance; the larks were singing. For many minutes none spoke, each conscious that they were floating through an earthly paradise, each lulled to dreams of the past and future, because the present was so adorably merged in both. Prudence, mildly benignant beneath a mushroom hat, smiled at Jacqueline, as if to say: "This is life as it ought to be, a fragrant pilgrimage through Arcadia."

Jacqueline's soft blue eyes blinked the familiar answer: "I quite agree, Sister." Rosetta, watching Rose, was speechless in front of the mysteries of growth and change, recalling the first sight of the baby, the puckered, orange-coloured girl, who ought to have been a boy, hearing its feeble wail, so inexpressibly forlorn. . . .

Rose's laugh broke the spell.

"Isn't this simply splendid?"

Victor paused for a suitable reply. Laying the paddle across his shapely legs, and bending forward, smiling into Rose's face he answered gravely:

"It's—top hole!"

After tea, they returned to the Dower House rather earlier than usual, because Jacqueline insisted that Prudence should not expose herself to the late evening air. Whereupon Rose expressed anxiety, allayed by Prudence herself.

"Your Aunt fusses over me."

"You have seen Dr. Pogany?"

"Why should I see him for a slight indisposition?"

So no more was said. The ladies were too old-fashioned to permit any reference to illness before a comparative stranger and in the presence of two young men. But Rose remarked that Aunt Prudence looked tired, and on the way home she fell into a doze, sleeping so quietly that for the first time the young girl was reminded of the last eternal sleep. She made a sign to Victor not to talk, and spread a soft white shawl over the slumbering figure now so significantly relaxed and fragile. Victor punted almost noiselessly; the drops from the pole fell melodiously upon the surface of the stream; the water lapped against the side of the slowly-moving punt. Rose sat upright, facing Victor, with her eyes upon Prudence. Tears gathered in them, and when the young man saw these his heart leapt with the desire to kiss them away. He divined her thoughts, sympathising with them. One of her faithful guardians might be called upon to leave Rose; and he would take the vacant place. He whispered tenderly: "Dear little Rose," and she looked up, reading the expression upon his face, and seeing him as he was, simple, kind, incapable of baseness, clean in mind and body, a Mauleverer of the best pattern!

Presently, round a bend in the river, Charminster floated into view. The mists obscured the lower and less pleasing part of the ancient town. But the old houses on the hill, with their steep, red-tiled roofs, not one of quite the same pitch as the others, were defined clearly against a pale blue sky. The tower of the church stood out above the massed buildings, and its vane shone golden. So it had stood, square and sturdy to the four winds of heaven, during five centuries of English history. Gazing at it, Rose heard the chiming of the clock, sweet notes sublimated by distance, and then the solemn tolling of the passing hour. . . .

Upon the pretext of seeing Mrs. Devenish, Rose was punted back to the cottage by Derek. As soon as the pair were alone, Derek began to speak enthusiastically of the future, of work in London, of his conviction that at last he had found himself.

"I am simply mad keen."

Designedly, he kept sentiment at bay, much to the disappointment of the maid, too inexperienced to see the passion so strenuously suppressed, and distressfully conscious that Derek's plans apparently did not include her. Annoyed with herself, slightly exasperated with Derek, she answered in monosyllables; and the young man inferred that a season in London had chilled friendship. Never was maid nearer to being kissed, and never was maid less aware of it. They parted with a vague understanding that they would meet again before Rose returned to Mauleverer House, but Derek was saying to himself, desperately: "I can't stand it. I won't see the witch till I have something to offer more solid than plans."

Whether he was wise or foolish, it is not our purpose to determine. Some inherited instinct constrained him to reserve his fire. Victor must shoot first. Also, he underrated his rival, being too young to understand the tremendous appeal that weakness in man ever makes to strength in woman. Victor's greatest asset—had he known it—was his need of a bold powerful character to share and direct his life. Rose's feeling for him was maternal, although she was unaware of this. Derek, in striking contrast, conveyed the impression in everything that he did or said of independence and self-reliance.

At the last moment, the pressure of his hand was comforting. Certainly he held the slim fingers tighter and longer than was necessary, but his voice never quavered, as he said:

"I'm going to get there, Rose, with both feet."

"And suppose you—shouldn't?"

"If I admitted the possibility of failure, I should be already halfway towards it."

Very different was the talk after dinner with Victor, as Rose and he sat alone in the garden, watching the midsummer moon and listening to the song of a nightingale. A pair nested regularly in the shrubbery behind the cedars; and the male, during the second hatching, seemed to sing with greater sweetness and fervour than during the first. Each pause brought forth a richer and more exquisitely modulated tone, a more sustained and liquid trill. Rose wondered whether all other warblers were trembling with envy.

Victor, however, paid no attention to either moon or nightingale. He accepted them calmly as part of the *mise-en-scène*. Long ago, he had decided that the garden of the Dower House was the right place for a proposal of marriage, and he felt tranquilly that the right time would come, if he waited patiently. Time and place had been natural allies ever since he was shortcoated. Never had he sought opportunity; always it floated gently to him.

He was not altogether without practice in the art of making love, but he had never fallen a victim to charms that might be stigmatised as unrefined. Grossness, in any form, was abhorrent to him.

He began with slight abruptness:

"Your Aunt Prudence is failing a little."

Rose sighed. "She is past seventy."

"I read your thoughts in the punt."

"I saw you did."

"I wish I could read other thoughts of yours as easily."

She laughed. "I am easy to read. You know what I like and dislike as well as anybody."

"You dislike slackness."

"I do, I do."

"I am rather slack."

"It's a hopeful sign that you know it."

"Sometimes," his voice grew serious, "I feel that I might do things, if I were sufficiently stirred up. Till I met you nobody ever tried to stir me up, except my tutor at Eton, who bored me to tears. It tired me to hear that man talk. Our colonel has the same effect. I suppose stirring up is not everybody's job. At any rate I refuse to be jabbed by a spur, but a gentle pressure from the right person——"

"Consider yourself gently pressed!"

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Far from it."

In the moonlight her face looked grave and white. He went on in his easy pleasant voice:

"I am, I suppose, a fairly cool chap, but you excite me tremendously."

"You don't look excited."

The tincture of irony in her voice made him move restlessly. He took her hand, very tenderly, and she noticed the soft touch of his fingers, the fine texture of his skin. This delicacy of skin and touch was a Mauleverer quality. The Aunts had it. They could have stroked the wing of a butterfly without injuring the microscopic feathers.

"Will you marry me?" he asked suddenly; and his voice broke.

She was startled out of self-possession, having on previous occasions eluded the direct question. Also, she perceived that he was at last excited *tremendously*, which stirred her strangely, and yet left her limp and—she hardly dared admit it—afraid. Afraid of—what? She could not answer. An unknown power, overwhelming and amorphous, seemed to be hovering about her. She exclaimed quickly: "Oh! I feel—I feel——"

"Tell me how you feel."

She answered with absolute truth. "As if we were playing: 'Out Pounce Piggy!'"

This terrifying game is played in the dark, preferably in a garden. Those children who hide crouch behind bushes; and the seekers must discover the ambush without being caught. The hiders wait till the last moment and then pounce. Rose continued without a pause:

"I am frightened, Victor. Perhaps I deserved to be. You may think me a flirt. I cannot answer you."

"You like me?" he said eagerly. "What on earth is there about me to frighten you?"

She answered softly: "It is not you. I am frightened at something greater than either of us; it is part of you and part of me and part of the darkness. It pounces! The truth is ridiculous, but it describes my feelings. Are you furious?"

"I rather rushed things."

He kissed her hand, which lay passive in his. He turned it over and kissed the palm. Rose withdrew her hand, as he whispered in her ear:

"I love you, Rose, but I can wait."

CHAPTER XII

A VISITATION

DEREK and his mother went to London in the beginning of July; and Rosetta moved into The Cottage. Since marriage, the Newmans had collected many fine pieces of furniture, probably the most profitable of their investments. With these were prints, and prints in colour, and some china and old glass. Before the furniture arrived from Appleby, where it had been stored, Rosetta had the cottage papered and painted. The garden sloping to the Char, and, encompassed by yew hedges, suggested great possibilities.

She installed herself about a week before Rose returned to the Dower House. The Misses Mauleverer were amongst the first to call, and when Charminster heard of this, it hastened to follow the august example. Mrs. Hooton suggested a change of name. "The Cottage," in her opinion, was commonplace. Her own house, spoken of by Alfred as a mansion, had been christened "Merrie Meade." There was no mead except a half-size croquet-court, and nothing about the stucco building to suggest merriment. Alfred, moreover, was as dull a dog as might be found in the kingdom; but Laura delighted in the name, and was convinced that it was absolutely appropriate and descriptive, and so English. It occurred to her that " Bower Holme " would " do " for " The Cottage."

" It's such a bower, dear Mrs. Newman ! and you have made it *so* homey."

" A home," said Rosetta, " implies a family."

" How true ! Well, then, what do you say to 'The Hermitage' ? "

" My notepaper is already ordered."

" That quite settles it," said Laura.

She examined everything, mentally pricing the more valuable pieces. She had learned this trick from her husband, who had found it useful. " You never know," he had said, " when things may come under the hammer." Laura found this appraising amusing as well as instructive, and she was able to boast that she could tell to within a few pounds what the contents of any room in Charminster would be likely to fetch at public auction. She told Alfred very solemnly, using the trade slang, that Mrs. Newman must have more than £2000 worth of " stuff."

" Sounds respectable," said Alfred, much impressed.

" My dear, no one could ever suspect dear Mrs. Newman of being anything else. But she bought her lovely things."

" Most people do."

" How silly men can be ! She might have inherited them. It's odd, but she has no heirlooms, no pictures, and very few photographs. She never talks about her relations."

" Sensible woman," said Alfred.

About this time Mrs. Pook asked: "Who is she?"

And nobody answered. Mrs. Pook, a Waygood of Wormleigh, said that it was unsatisfactory; but Mrs. Easter, who had a cousin, a solicitor in Appleby, silenced criticism by remarking that although the Newmans lived very quietly in Westmorland, they had been accepted by three county families and were held in high esteem by the rector of their parish.

Rosetta settled down in her new home with a satisfaction which she found herself unable to analyse. She had the philosophic spirit, we know, and after the suffering caused by meeting Rose reaction was inevitable. Looking at her pretty things so charmingly arranged, with a heart melted by the sympathy and friendliness of her neighbours, she began to face the future with more equanimity. She would see much of her sisters, become the dear friend of their declining years, and share with them an atmosphere of peace and forgetfulness dear to all Mauleverers. When Rose married, she and her children would often come to Charminster.

Thus she mused, smiling faintly at fate, ever kindest to those who accept without rebellion her decrees.

Through Rosetta's influence, Derek had been offered a billet in the offices of a famous daily, the *Morning Call*, whose editor had written approvingly of the new recruit: "The boy is full of ginger; he will get on."

When Rosetta mentioned this to Jacqueline, she replied that, all things considered, it was just as well that a handsome young man had found work elsewhere.

"Although we regret," she added, "that he is serving a Radical paper."

"That is my fault. The editor happens to be a personal friend of mine."

"Oh! Derek's father, I have been told, was a Radical. That accounts for so much."

Rosetta inferred that Radicals were more likely to be brutal to their wives than good Conservatives. She suggested that reporters furnished items of news and not political opinions.

"I am relieved to hear that. Between ourselves, Rose and he were a little too friendly."

"He is clever and strong," said Rosetta. "He may go far."

Jacqueline nodded, reflecting placidly that the farther Derek went the better. Rosetta continued with slight nervousness:

"Boy and girl friendships are more serious than some of us imagine. If your niece had really cared for this young man——?"

Jacqueline assumed an expression of shocked surprise very familiar to Rosetta.

"My dear Mrs. Newman——!"

"Perhaps," said Rosetta lightly, realising the thinness of the ice, "I do not quite see eye to eye with you about certain things. Personally, I should wish a daughter of mine to marry the man she loved, provided he was worthy. I should not allow want of rank or money to interfere."

Jacqueline frowned, as she answered petulantly:

"He has nothing, and Rose will have four thousand a year."

"Is it as much as that?"

"Probably more. She might marry anybody."

" In that case money need not stand between her and the man of her choice."

" A match between my niece and Derek Devenish is quite unthinkable, dear Mrs. Newman."

Rosetta steered the talk into less perilous channels.

As soon as Rose appeared, Rosetta marked a change in her. She had a preoccupied air ; her laugh was less spontaneous and mirthful, she resumed her simple life at the Dower House with a cheerfulness that seemed a trifle forced.

On the other hand, her friendship with Rosetta flowered instantly, exhibiting enchanting blooms. Vere Easter was in France. Rose had acquired the habit of telling Vere everything, and silence became intolerable. Within a few days she perceived in Rosetta the qualities of a perfect *confidante.* One afternoon, she said shyly :

" I'm sure people tell you secrets."

" Thank you," said Rosetta.

Rose murmured half-apologetically :

" There are subjects I can't discuss with my dear Aunts. You know what darlings they are, but, all the same, to get on comfortably with them it is necessary to think as they do."

" And don't you ? "

" Not always. Sometimes I feel rather a humbug, because it is easy to agree with them, and I love to hear them purr. I owe them so much."

" Would they wish you to measure that ? "

" Oh no ; still——! "

She paused. As Rosetta remained silent, wooing confidence with eyes only, the girl continued nervously :

" I measure my debt. I must measure it. Mr.

Easter rubbed it into Vere and me that youth takes too much for granted. That made us squirm, because at the time I was getting shamelessly impatient with their funny little ways. He pointed out that when I was a child, they had never been impatient with me. A nasty one that. And so obvious. Why is it that we so seldom see what is under our own noses ? "

" The height of the Mauleverer nose may obscure the view."

" But you have a nose like ours."

" That is why I know."

Rose laughed gaily.

" Mrs. Newman, you're a dear. I feel so at home with you ; and I'm not a gusher ; I don't make friends easily."

" I should like to be your friend," said Rosetta.

Thereupon Rose kissed her, pressing fresh young lips to the elder woman's cheek. But, immediately afterwards, there was a slight constraint, and soon Rose returned to the Dower House. Rosetta wondered whether the Aunts would be jealous, but next day Prudence remarked with emphasis :

" Your being so near a neighbour, Mrs. Newman, is a great pleasure to Rose. We are, of course, rather elderly for the child. I trust she does not bore you."

" I am always delighted to see her, Miss Mauleverer."

" That is well." Prudence smiled graciously. " We feel so easy in our minds when she is with you or Mrs. Easter."

" Do you go to Bognor this year ? "

" I think not. Rose has had all the change she needs. We must organise some excursions on the river."

"How pleasant that will be!"

"Captain Mauleverer—did you hear that he had got his company?—will be with us later on. What do you think of him?"

"I like him immensely."

The Aunts nodded, purring softly, and blinking their short-sighted eyes. Rosetta divined that each was whispering to herself: "This nice Mrs. Newman will say pleasant things of dear Victor to little Rose." Their contentment diffused itself impalpably, like the silence which succeeds the last notes of a great symphony. It would be cruel indeed to imperil this all-sufficing peace.

Jacqueline walked with Rosetta as far as the wicket-gate, near the sunk fence.

"You heard what my sister said about Bognor. She is not up to it, Mrs. Newman. I wish we could persuade her to call in our medical attendant, Dr. Pogany."

The sky seemed less clear, as Rosetta asked with scarcely veiled anxiety: "Is there anything serious?"

"Prudence would be vexed with me for mentioning it. There have been palpitations, not acute but distressing."

"Certainly she ought to see Dr. Pogany."

"Yes; it is almost an idiosyncrasy. She is afraid that the verdict might be—unfavourable."

Jacqueline's soft voice trembled. Rosetta made a suggestion:

"Rose might persuade her."

"I can speak plainly to you. Rose is the obstacle. The dear child would worry dreadfully. It might spoil her return home."

"I see," said Rosetta; "but if I were you I should venture to assume the responsibility of sending for Dr. Pogany."

"Oh! I couldn't. It would upset my sister terribly. She is, little as you might imagine it, a *maîtresse femme.*"

"Ah!"

"Pray don't mention my sister's indisposition to Rose."

"I promise."

"Doubtless it will pass. We have made it a rule to ignore as much as possible petty ailments. Don't you agree with me that it is wise to turn one's eyes from what is disagreeable?"

"Not always," said Rosetta.

A few days later, Rosetta had grim reason to recall this conversation. Mr. Easter came to her in great distress.

"Have you heard of our visitation?"

"What visitation?"

"Typhus, of a virulent sort, has broken out in Hog Lane, in those slums at the lower end. I knew that it would come some day. Heaven knows we have spoken often enough about it, and always to deaf ears. We need money and helpers. Each case must be isolated, and watched day and night. The hospital here is useless. No provision against a bad epidemic has ever been made. Unhappily, with the exception of young Lord Charminster, we have no rich men, and he is impoverished by the size of his estates."

Rosetta wrote out a cheque.

"I am on my way to the Dower House." He paused, and added reluctantly: "The ladies refused long ago to face this possibility, and others governed themselves accordingly. I dread breaking the news to them."

"I can spare you that, at any rate," said Rosetta. "They will help liberally."

"They have always done so," said the Vicar.

"I will tell them at once."

"It is most kind of you."

He went his way, and Rosetta walked through the water-meadows to the Dower House. The Aunts and Rose were on the lawn. Rose was reading aloud the leading article of *The Times*, articulating each word with precision, for the ladies were certainly growing deafer. When Crump announced the visitor, Rose laid down the paper with an air of relief. She exclaimed gaily:

"We are so glad to see you, but somehow you don't look equally glad at seeing us."

Rosetta explained the nature of her errand. As she had expected, her sisters expressed incredulity at first, and then, as the gravity of the situation was gently forced upon their notice, Prudence remarked piously:

"We are in the hands of Almighty God!"

"We can't hold Him responsible!" exclaimed Rose, vehemently.

Her Aunts looked down their noses. Prudence said calmly:

"Is typhus a contagious disease?"

"Very."

"Um! We must reconsider our determination not to go to Bognor."

"What will be done?" demanded Rose.

"The Vicar is collecting subscriptions. We shall want doctors and nurses and food and medicine."

Jacqueline said nervously:

"We shall subscribe, eh, sister?"

"Certainly." Prudence looked anxiously at Rose, and her voice was less firm as she said decisively: "We must go to Bognor to-morrow."

"On my account?" Rose demanded. Before her Aunts could answer, she continued quickly: "I want to stay and help."

"That is quite out of the question," said Prudence. "You agree with me, Mrs. Newman?"

Rosetta, racked by conflicting emotions, hesitated.

"I do—don't know," she stammered.

"I do," said Prudence with decision. "Young people are more liable than old to contagion."

Jacqueline, losing control of her voice, murmured piteously: "If anything happened to you, child, through our negligence, I could never meet your beloved mother."

"I suppose I must do as I am told," said Rose grimly. "But if I had my way I'd volunteer as a nurse this very afternoon."

"Tut!" said Prudence.

Rosetta returned to her cottage by the path which skirted the river. Presently she came to her old trysting-place, where Septimus had talked of the golden future. The elm-tree blasted by lightning was gone. Cut into logs, it may have served to warm the limbs of the Misses Mauleverer during the long chill winter evenings, the last use of a noble tree. If they had known what passed beneath that elm! Rosetta smiled derisively, picturing her sisters listening to the tale of kisses, refusing to believe a word of the story, blushing with shame that such scandal should be repeated!

She sat down on the bank of the river, leaning her head upon her hand. The morning had been excessively warm, with thunder in the air. Now, a breeze ruffled the smooth surface of the Char, fanning Rosetta's cheeks and leaving in her nostrils the unmistakable odour of the sea. Only a few miles away heaved that mighty, restless element. The water of the Char, discoloured by recent rains, would soon be merged in its vast, palpitating bosom, there to be purged, and then, transformed into vapour, it would rise again to fall in crystalline purity upon the parched earth, washing it clean, taking from it, and absorbing, a myriad impurities.

Rosetta had often applied this law of purification to herself. Unclean—she had courage to face the word—she was swept into the great purging ocean of love. Upon its troubled waters she had tossed, wondering whether she would sink or swim. She had not sunk. When Septimus died the long process of purification became complete. What design lay behind the cleansing? Was it ordained that she should return to Charminster to cleanse others, even at the risk of defiling herself?

She wondered.

Early next morning, she went to Mr. Easter and offered her services. At first he refused to accept them, but the need of helpers was urgent; and the volunteers were few.

"We are in for a serious epidemic," he said. "Do you realise that? Everything is against us, the hot weather, the overcrowding, the abominable sanitary conditions."

"I have realised all that."

"Madam," he bowed, "you are a brave woman, but I could wish that you were stronger."

Before night, ten fresh cases were reported. Upon the following day, Derek appeared. He went straight to The Cottage.

"I am here to report at length for my paper," he said keenly. "There's going to be a jolly row over this, Mrs. Newman."

"I wish they could have sent some one else."

"Why?"

"Well, the Aunts own some of the cottages, don't they?"

Derek looked rather dismayed.

"By Jove!" he muttered; "I'd clean forgotten that."

CHAPTER XIII

CONFIDENCES

WITHIN a week the eyes of England were focussed upon Charminster, to the intense exasperation of the good townspeople, who, having sighed for cheap advertisement, were now indignant because they were getting it, not quite in the form they wished, for nothing. It being the silly season, the *Morning Call* opened a column to correspondence, and screeds appeared signed " Hygiene," " Sanitas," and the like, with caustic editorial comments. Charminster became the scapegoat of all ancient, slumbering, moss-grown towns.

Meantime, the Misses Mauleverer did not retreat to Bognor. Rose, indeed, achieved a masterly compromise. She promised to keep out of Hog Lane, and she persuaded her Aunts that it would be cowardly to run away. She remained, however, in quarantine at the Dower House, Rosetta and Derek being declared " out of bounds."

This was Derek's great chance—and he knew it.

" As soon as I heard of the visitation," he told Rosetta, " I told our news-editor that I had lived in Hog Lane, and knew the conditions. ' Devenish,' said he, 'I believe you are the man for this nasty job. Make what you can of it.'"

Rosetta was not long in discovering that he meant to make much of it, regardless of the feelings of landlords and officials. Possibly he had inherited a craving to destroy vermin from his fox-hunting ancestors. And if foxes could not be killed in the open, he did not hesitate to dig them out of snug earths.

Amongst other respectable city fathers he attacked Dr. Pogany. Dr. Pogany's most dangerous rival was a young, up-to-date doctor of the name of Round, who had been house-surgeon at one of the big London hospitals. From Round, Derek obtained much of his "copy," and Round, having suffered many snubs from authority, was not inclined to spare anybody, least of all himself.

Loving a fight for a fight's sake, Derek flung himself into the battle. And, of course, it leaked out that the articles in the *Morning Call* were written by his pen. The emotions of the ladies at the Dower House when they perused passages like the following can be imagined :—

"Hog Lane, as the name implies, stands festering in the sun, an object-lesson of ignorance, stupidity, and selfishness. The hovels, sties in which a self-respecting pig might hesitate to wallow, are owned by well-to-do churchgoers and communicants comfortably housed in the upper part of the town, with their eyes fixed upon their own salvation, blind to the damnation of those from whom they derive a substantial portion of their income, deaf to the mute appeal of starving children, turning their noses from the reek of squalor and disease, gazing complacently at the flowers in their own fools' paradise, admiring themselves and their works, and reverentially leaving the responsibility of everything which offends their susceptibilities—to God!"

Jacqueline read this excerpt aloud to Prudence.

"Is the writer of this alluding to us?" she asked in a quavering voice.

As a fact, Derek was not alluding to the ladies, but they were disagreeably sensible that the cap made for Mr. Hooton, who owned some of the Hog Lane cottages, or for John Possnicker, the principal draper, might fit them.

"Who has written it?" said Prudence.

"I can tell you," answered Rose. "Derek Devenish."

"The allusion to communicants is outrageous!"

"Why?"

The ladies closed their lips, and allowed their wrinkled lids to veil indignant eyes. Derek had passed beyond the pale.

Matters became worse when he attacked Dr. Pogany. The ladies felt that the *Morning Call* ought to be burnt by the common hangman, or, failing him, Crump; but curiosity overcame disgust. They trembled with rage as they read other articles, but they went on reading them. *A propos* of Dr. Pogany, Jacqueline said tearfully:

"Grey hairs should be spared."

And once more Rose used that aggravating monosyllable:

"Why?"

Let us admit that Derek allowed enthusiasm to whirl him from the pleasant domain of discretion. He was writing at white-heat, scribbling notes amidst scenes of indescribable horror, working strenuously, acclaimed by those who worked with him, abominated by the many who held aloof.

Details of his untiring energy reached Rose through the solid medium of Crump. The aged handmaiden kept a soft corner in her desiccated heart for all bold spirits of the opposite sex. She had confirmation strong from Thomas Veal:

"Seemin'ly 'e ain't afraid o' nothink, Master Derek. 'E ain't even afraid of a policeman, no more 'an 'e is of me and you!"

And, naturally, Derek fired Rose, constrained to look on, twiddling idle thumbs, when the bodies and bones of her friends were aching with fatigue and exhaustion.

The mortality was frightful.

Captain Mauleverer paid his promised visit. Prudence begged him to stay away from Charminster, but he laughed at her fears. Mary Mauleverer asked the pair to The Court. Rose refused. The Aunts protested, but she remained firm.

"I stay here till this is over."

Throughout August the sun blazed down upon Hog Lane. But at the end of the month a mighty wind, following torrential rain, began to blow the disease out of the town. The tale of deaths diminished; and Derek was recalled to London. Before he left Charminster he had an interview with Rose. The pair met upon the river; and punt challenged punt. Derek looked none the worse for his campaign, and it seemed to Rose that he gazed at her with bolder eyes.

" I'm off to-morrow," he said loudly.

" Oh ! Derek, the Aunts are furious with you."

" I'm really most awfully sorry. Mrs. Newman told me that I've been indiscreet. Are you furious too ? "

" No."

He stayed the progress of his punt with the pole, thrusting it deep into the mud. Rose did the same. A dozen feet of water separated them, and the distance seemed to Derek significant, because she was so near to him and yet so distractingly out of reach. He thought of the long hours she had spent with Victor, and jealousy tore at his vitals.

" You look fit," he remarked.

" Perhaps your energy has kept me so."

This made him open his eyes. What did she mean ? Nothing, of course. A slightly ironic habit of speech.

" I hear Mauleverer is with you."

" Yes. He wished to help, but the Aunts, of course, forbade it."

" Is he making much of a visit ? " He put the question lightly, but Rose was not deceived. A demure sparkle twinkled in her eyes as she replied :

" He will be here another ten days. We ride together and play tennis. I've come on a lot at tennis, although he beats me disgracefully."

" Love games," growled Derek.

" What did you say, Derek ? "

"Nothing worth repeating."

He laid violent hands on his pole. What was the use of staring at grapes out of reach? Rose's smile, as he wrenched the pole out of the mud, struck him as derisive.

"Good-bye, Rose. You know that I wish you luck."

"What luck?"

"All the luck you've not got already."

"Thank you. You seem to be in a hurry?"

He laughed at her tone, sore though he was, and said: "I suppose I've acquired the habit. Also, aren't you breaking rules by speaking to me?"

"That's more my affair than yours, isn't it?"

Her apparent coolness misled him. He thought to himself: "She's a flirt, practising with me to pass the time. I can't stand this much longer." Aloud, he said politely: "I beg your pardon."

Rose said slowly:

"I promised Aunt Prudence that I would not speak to you if I happened to meet you in Charminster. How is Mrs. Newman?"

"Rather fagged."

"She's wonderful; but the Aunts are not quite so pleased with her."

"Why?"

"They think she inspired your articles. They know that she got you your billet."

"Please tell the Aunts that Mrs. Newman tried to make me tone down my stuff."

"Don't get excited. I'm looking forward to playing the peacemaker."

"On my behalf as well?"

"That won't be easy. They are sadly ruffled, poor dears! By the way, why didn't you come to see me in London?"

"I wasn't asked."

"Oh! Of course, if you stand on ceremony with old friends——!"

"I was busy all day and every day."

"Sundays included?"

"Mother books me ahead for all Sundays."

"I wonder when I shall see you again?"

Anybody, except a youth blinded by love, would have remarked the anxiety in her soft voice. Derek, however, was confirmed in the conviction that she was flirting. Jealousy of Victor consumed judgment and common sense. She walked and rode with Victor, read aloud to him, sat for hours together with him. The fellow wouldn't have turned up, defying a pestilence, had he not received encouragement. The affair was as good as settled. He replied grimly:

"I shan't come back to Charminster. Good-bye, Rose."

"Good-bye, Derek."

To relieve his feelings he pushed with his pole so violently that he nearly fell overboard. Rose was unwise enough to laugh. Whereupon, recovering his balance and losing his temper, he said savagely:

"Awfully funny, isn't it?"

Before she could answer, his punt was several yards down stream. A lump came in her throat. She wanted to speak, to call him back, but the lump seemed to get bigger. She decided to follow, but her own pole, stuck fast in the deep mud of the Char, refused obstinately to budge. In the mid-distance Derek was punting furiously.

"Why did I laugh," she asked herself, "when I wanted to cry?"

She tugged at the pole, but when it came out, pride, and the possibility that she would not overtake Derek, baulked pursuit. She returned to the Dower House, and was very cross with Victor when he asked in all innocence if she had been enjoying herself.

At the end of ten days the Heir of the Family asked her to marry him, and, after being refused for the second time, was obliged to tell the Aunts of his ill-fortune. They were confounded, and, as usual, petulant with perplexity and dismay.

"We made sure that all was well," said Jacqueline.

Prudence, with a tremendous effort, collected her wits.

"My dear mother," she observed, "refused my father five times. My father often laughed about it."

"We Mauleverers are persevering," said Victor.

"There can be nobody else," murmured Jacqueline. "Mary Mauleverer told me that in London she showed no preference for anybody except you."

Victor remained silent, but he also had assumed a slightly peevish expression.

"You don't think there is anybody else?" continued Jacqueline.

"There's the hero."

"What hero?"

"Derek Devenish."

"My dear Victor, are you quite mad?"

He replied obstinately:

"I know she thinks a lot of him."

Both ladies hastened to disabuse his mind of such a monstrous possibility. They succeeded partially, and the young man promised amiably enough to try again later on, when he met Rose at Mauleverer Court.

After he went away, Rose was allowed to visit The Cottage, where Mrs. Newman was undergoing a sort of rest-cure. Round said that she had overworked mind and body, and prescribed an easy-chair on the lawn, and plenty of light and agreeable fiction. The epidemic was over, but it had accomplished its purpose. Charminster proceeded to put its ancient houses, big and little, into decent order. Long ago, Septimus Lovibond had remarked that nothing short of an invasion would wake up the sleepy town. Perhaps, in the case of invasions, germs may be as stimulating as Germans.

Each day Rose read aloud to Rosetta; and each day apprehension clawed at the mother's heart, for she believed that Rose was sickening for the fever. Rose ridiculed such fears, and Round, although unable to examine one of Dr. Pogany's patients, declared emphatically that the young lady must be suffering from something else, possibly an affection of the heart.

Before September was out, Rosetta found courage to ask:

"My dear, what is wrong with you? Don't exasperate me by replying, 'Nothing.' You have lost colour and appetite. I am sure that you don't sleep well. Now—deliver your soul!"

"I can't."

"Ah! There is something. Are you sorry that you refused Captain Mauleverer?"

"I don't know."

"You ought to know. I must shake knowledge into you."

"Aunt Jacqueline believes Aunt Prudence is ill, but she refuses to see Dr. Pogany. I believe she is worrying terribly because I did refuse Victor. She set her heart on the match. I dare say I shan't find anybody I like better."

"Oh!"

"I've always liked him."

"And you think life with him would be easy and pleasant?"

"I am quite sure of it."

"So am I. But—would that satisfy you? Can you curl up in front of a nice fire and purr contentedly for the rest of your days?"

"Lots of women ask for nothing better."

"Are you one of them?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you think your liking for Captain Mauleverer would stand the test of poverty, for instance?"

"But we shouldn't be poor."

"I want you to use your imagination, to face things as they might be. Could you look forward cheerfully to spending a year alone with him on a desert island, food and sunshine guaranteed?"

"How oddly you put things, Mrs. Newman!"

"Could you cook and wash for him?"

Rose laughed.

"He wouldn't eat what I cooked."

"Evading my questions you answer them. I don't believe a marriage of convenience would agree with you. It does agree, undoubtedly, with women who think convenience the greatest thing in the world."

"Of course, I don't think that."

"I want you to project your mind into the future, to decide what you want, and then concentrate your will upon getting it."

"Suppose I want something I can't get?"

Farther than that the maid refused to go. Rosetta bit her lip with impatience. To sit at ease, watching the freshness and daintiness of the face opposite, and to realise one's impotence to share experience with the inexperienced, became maddening. And she found it difficult to speak about herself; difficult to give form and colour to ill-defined memories, to blurred, amorphous incidents, visualised so acutely at the time, but now so attenuated.

Next day the struggle to obtain a girl's confidence began again. Rose spoke of the approaching "shoot" at Mauleverer Court. Victor would be there with two guns and a loader.

"He cares for me tremendously," said Rose. "Last month I was punting him one day, and the punt leaked. He sat in an inch of water without knowing it. But," she sighed, "we're so different."

"There's nothing more stupendously significant than differences in temperament. That's at the root of all evil. Nobody ever attempts to adjust them, and I doubt very much if they can be adjusted."

"I love these talks with you."

"I am going to speak of myself," said Rosetta abruptly. "When I was your age—yes, and before—I fell in love."

Rose sat bolt upright, turning shining eyes upon the speaker.

"With Mr. Newman?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, with Mr. Newman. But at that time he was poor, and I hadn't a penny. We were not allowed to become engaged. He went abroad and lost everything he had, including the chance of getting me."

"How awful!"

"You have read 'Back of Nowhere.' All that happened."

"When I read it I knew it must have happened."

"Then I made a marriage of convenience. Never speak of this!"

"A marriage of convenience—you?"

"It was disastrous. I pass over that. After my first husband died I married Mr. Newman, but we had both changed enormously. It was not the same."

Rose leant forward, and said in a whisper:

"Is it wicked to marry one man if you love somebody else?"

"Yes."

"Even if the person you love doesn't love you?"

"Yes."

Rose blushed beneath the elder woman's penetrating glance, but the Mauleverer instinct triumphed. She remained obstinately silent. Rosetta said abruptly:

"I know what is the matter with you."

The blush deepened.

"You care for Derek Devenish."

Rose's eyes filled with tears.

"Are you ashamed of loving one of the finest young men I have ever met?"

"No; but I'm ashamed of caring for him when he doesn't care for me."

"Perhaps he does care for you."

"Oh, Mrs. Newman!" Then her face clouded, as she continued impetuously: "If he did care, my Aunts would never let me marry him. They are furious with him. They think he attacked them."

"So he did—unconsciously."

"I don't think he cares—much. If anything came of it, it would kill Aunt Prudence. And when I think of what I owe those two——!"

"If you can't persuade your Aunt to call in Dr. Pogany, I must try my powers of persuasion."

"I wish you would."

That night Rosetta hardly closed her eyes. Her own youth came back to her, and with it the conviction that her daughter's life was about to be wrecked upon the same quicksands which had engulfed her happiness. The child had begun to measure her debt to devoted guardians, and the sum-total was likely to awake a lively desire to pay something on account.

Upon the following afternoon Rosetta called at the Dower House, and was received graciously, the Aunts having purged their minds of the tainting thought that so charming a woman could have inspired brutal and unjustifiable articles. Jacqueline said in her softest voice:

"I trust you have recovered your strength?"

"I was only tired and—frightened."

"Frightened?" echoed Prudence.

"I feared I might be sickening for the fever, and, oddly enough, I was afraid to consult a doctor, terrified lest he might say that I had got it. When he did come he laughed at me."

Prudence nodded, much impressed. Rosetta marked the impression, and proceeded to deepen it.

"I should have felt such a fool, if he had found the fever on me, and then said that he had been called in too late to cope with it. Doctors, I believe, are terribly handicapped by folly of that sort."

"I quite agree," said Jacqueline, with a side glance at Prudence.

Rosetta said no more, but when she was alone for a minute with Jacqueline that lady whispered hurriedly:

"I was delighted to hear you speak as you did about calling in doctors before a case becomes really serious. *Entre nous*, I have been worrying about Prudence. After your talk, I fancy she will be more reasonable."

Within a few days Rosetta learned from Rose that Dr. Pogany had been summoned, and, after careful examination, diagnosed the case as one of acute dyspepsia, which would yield to ordinary treatment. Rose added:

"I shall go to the Court with an easier mind."

Then, abruptly, with heightened colour, she said:

"General Stonestreet has appointed Victor one of his aides-de-camp."

"Which means, I suppose, that he will go out to South Africa if——"

"It is certain that war will be declared in a few days."

This was said during that anxious first week in October just before the Boer ultimatum was handed to the British agent at Pretoria. All England was simmering with excitement, and every woman thinking of the men who would be the first to go. Rosetta saw at a glance that Rose was tremendously affected, and that the one thing which might turn the scale in Victor's favour had come to pass. If he pressed her now, she might yield; and there could be no doubt that he would use every argument in his power, and that the Aunts would support him with tears in their soft eyes, and quavering appeals.

To mask her own agitation, Rosetta began to talk of the impending campaign. General Stonestreet was a cavalry leader, who had seen Victor ride to hounds; to be selected by him as aide-de-camp was a great compliment, as Rosetta remarked. Rose said eagerly:

"Isn't it? He has never had a chance to show what he is made of."

Rosetta was too wise to dispute this. After more talk, she said quietly:

"What are you doing this afternoon?"

"I am playing a last game of tennis at the Easters'."

"I think I shall call on your Aunts."

"Do. They will be delighted to see you."

"Will this appointment interfere with Captain Mauleverer's visit to the Court?"

"I had a letter from him this morning. He hopes to be there next week, but if that is impossible he has promised to run down here to say good-bye."

Rosetta kissed her.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BLINDS ARE PULLED UP

ROSETTA found Jacqueline beaming, her soft face radiating tenderness, as she murmured:

"Dear Dr. Pogany says that my sister's heart is quite strong, wonderfully so for a woman of her age. The palpitations arose entirely from dyspepsia. Oh, the relief to me, Mrs. Newman! I feel years younger."

Nevertheless, she spoke tremulously, with quavering gestures of head and hands. Then, in the effusion of joy she kissed Rosetta, and taking off her spectacles wiped them several times. An instant later, Prudence came in, very erect, with the air of one who has decided to live to be a hundred at least.

"I assured Jacqueline from the first that it was nothing, a temporary indisposition. But it is pleasant to have one's opinion confirmed by a professional man."

The three ladies sat down. Prudence enthroned herself upon the chair in which her father had died, and assumed a majesty of deportment reminding Rosetta of days long past, for this particular chair had been used as a seat of judgment. Swiftly the years rolled back, and Rosetta beheld herself a child of ten awaiting rebuke from the Olympians, conscious that excuses would not be accepted, that the rigour of justice must be imposed.

"I have come to you," she began, "upon an intimate matter, which you may think, Miss Mauleverer, does not concern me, but before I say more I should like to mention one fact. I knew your sister, Lady Brough, very intimately indeed."

Prudence was extraordinarily shrewd in certain ways. Perhaps the aquiline nose which carries itself high above the affairs of others does detect with unerring scent the odour of interference. Her voice lost its pleasant warmth, as she replied courteously:

"Oddly enough, in her letters to us, Lady Brough did not mention your name."

"I had not married Mr. Newman at that time."

"Oh?"

The exclamation was interrogative. It occurred to both the ladies that the moment was pat for explanation. All Charminster wondered who Mrs. Newman *was*. The disclosure of her maiden name seemed imminent. Rosetta smiled faintly, as she continued:

"I could give you details of that intimacy, which would show you how near it was, and would illustrate what you know already, namely, that Lady Brough, after her marriage, could not bring herself to write, even to you, of her unhappiness, which she kept hidden from everybody—except me."

"Except you?" repeated Jacqueline softly.

"Except me," Rosetta went on. "She had hardly any secrets from me."

"This is most surprising," said Prudence, frowning.

"Lady Mauleverer knew, and I knew, that the marriage with Sir Rodney Brough was one of convenience. She married the man she didn't love, because she could not marry the man she did love—devotedly."

Her voice died away in a whisper.

"Good gracious," ejaculated Jacqueline, trembling with agitation. Prudence remained rigid, speechless with astonishment.

"That man," said Rosetta, "was Septimus Lovibond. You suspected the truth, although you refused to face it. You," she looked at Prudence, "arranged that Septimus Lovibond should be sent abroad."

Prudence compressed her lips. Her face grew white and austere, as she answered:

"I am astonished, Mrs. Newman, that you should know these things. You speak with such conviction that I hardly dare to question your statements. I did suspect a—a flirtation, not," her voice hardened, "not an infatuation which must have been deliberately concealed from us. Do you affirm solemnly that Rosetta told you she *loved* Septimus Lovibond?"

"I pledge you my word of honour."

"God help us!" exclaimed Jacqueline.

"In arranging that this young man should be sent abroad I acted according to my lights. I have nothing to regret. Under similar circumstances I would so act again."

"That is why I am here," said Rosetta.

"I don't understand."

"I come to you, Miss Mauleverer, as the most intimate friend of your dead sister, to say to you what I believe she would say herself, if she were here. I despise officious interference as much as you do. At this moment I am suffering cruelly."

"Please go on."

"I can't believe that Rosetta loved Septimus," declared Jacqueline tearfully.

"Lady Mauleverer will confirm that."

"You know her too?"

"Very well indeed. We have seldom met of late, but we have corresponded for years."

Jacqueline burst out crying, rocking to and fro in a paroxysm of misery, murmuring brokenly:

"If she loved him—! Oh, I can't bear the thought of that! I can't bear it! Poor child!"

"Jacqueline," commanded Prudence, "please control yourself. Mrs. Newman is still a comparative stranger, and I cannot yet grasp her reason for inflicting this painful scene upon us."

Jacqueline dabbed at her eyes with a filmy cambric handkerchief.

"My reason is that you are, consciously or unconsciously—I believe *unconsciously*—imposing a marriage of convenience upon Rosetta's daughter."

Very rarely did Prudence lose control of her temper; but the de Clancy blood had been hot, and time had not altogether cooled it. She said with asperity:

"I must decline to discuss that with you, Mrs. Newman."

"Sister!"

"Jacqueline, hold your tongue! Mrs. Newman will be telling us next that Rose has fallen in love with some impossible young man."

"Rose has fallen in love, Miss Mauleverer."

"What!"

She raised her voice. Jacqueline, glancing at the windows, opening wide upon the quiet garden, got up unsteadily and closed them. Prudence exclaimed scornfully: "As you will, but I think we need air. So Rose has fallen in love! With whom, may I ask?"

"With Derek Devenish."

Jacqueline groaned, falling collapsed into her chair, covering her quivering face with her hands.

"He told you that?" asked Prudence.

"She told me."

The cruel thrust went home. For the first time Prudence winced, inasmuch as this stranger had won confidence withheld from her and Jacqueline. She was a just woman, with a mind narrow but deep and lucid. Unlike Jacqueline, who may be compared to a sun-dial, recording only sunny hours, the elder sister had never hid from herself disagreeable truths. She had ignored much during her long life, had refused to see much, but the things which intimately concerned her, good and evil, she remembered. At this moment she knew that Rosetta's confidence had been withheld because her upbringing was strict, unduly so by the light of the love lavished upon her child. Consistently tender and indulgent had the sisters been to little Rose, and it was their dearest joy to reflect that they had won and kept a heart that lay open before them, a crystal pool into which they might gaze, beholding all reflections from within and without.

Two tears trickled down Prudence's thin, faded cheeks, and fell unheeded upon the black silk apron which she always wore.

That was her only sign of weakness. Possibly, too, the sight of Jacqueline crushed and speechless roused the pride and obstinacy of her nature. She lifted her fine head, and met Rosetta's sorrowful glance.

"I thank you," she said coldly, "for telling me this. I will deal with the matter."

"But how?"

"You are pressing me too hard, Mrs. Newman. There is nothing more to be said. Please leave us."

She rose with dignity, not offering her hand.

Very slowly, she moved towards the bell.

"Stay!" exclaimed Rosetta.

Her voice rang out imperatively. Prudence turned, not sorry, perhaps, that this stranger was making it possible for a courteous, long-suffering woman to administer a rebuke to an unwelcome guest. Rosetta may have divined that if she spoke at all, she must speak now, with the passion long suppressed, speak so swiftly that interruption would be burked.

"How will you deal with it? Answer me that! Is a tragic history about to repeat itself? Are you going to separate Derek and Rose as long ago you separated Septimus and Rosetta? He is worthy of her. If it were not so, I would move heaven and earth to prevent their marriage. He has everything that a lover should have—except money; and she has that. They are young, they can wait a couple of years, but for God's sake, for the sake of your unhappy sister, pause before you tamper with the souls of these two. Pause, I say, before you imperil the tender love which Rose bears you. Pause ! "

In her excitement and passion, she forgot to lower her voice. She spoke with Rosetta's clear tones, with Rosetta's passionate entreaty. And into her pale face flowed the warm blood of youth, never so warm as when pleading for youth. The ladies stared at her in silence. It seemed to them that Rosetta had spoken, that this was indeed a message from the beloved dead. Under this poignant conviction Prudence answered. Many years before, Mary Maulever¿er had thus extorted an exposition of principles, a defence of rules elaborately formulated, and kept inviolate.

" I reply to you, Mrs. Newman, under protest. I am Rose's guardian, and as such I shall do what I deem to be my duty. I consider this young man unfit to marry my niece. Proof lies in the fact that he has abused our hospitality and friendship in carrying on this clandestine love affair. He has not behaved like a gentleman."

" Pardon me. There has been no love-making. He loves her, she loves him, but no words have passed between them. That makes the situation more delicate. That excuses my presence here, because each has confided in me, and each thinks that the other doesn't care. But they care so much that their lives will be wrecked if—if you choose to blind yourself to the presence of true love."

" You have relieved my mind," said Prudence, " but my opinion of Derek Devenish is not changed ; and I have known him longer than you. He struck his own father."

"Under the provocation of seeing his mother ill-treated."

"I cannot go into that. The young man is violent; his ways are not our ways: young girls are foolish; Rose will soon get over this."

"Did her mother get over it?"

"Mrs. Newman, I must insist that no more be said. I acquit you of interference, but this is an affair in which you are, and must remain, an outsider."

She glanced at Jacqueline.

"I quite agree," murmured the younger sister.

"I am an old woman," said Prudence, with pathetic dignity, "and the day cannot be far distant when I shall meet my sister. I am not afraid of that meeting, and I say this to you because you were her friend. Because of that friendship I have borne with you patiently. I shall deal with the child knowing that I must answer for my conduct to my God, and, if He so wills it, to Rose's mother."

The grim inflexibility of tone was more eloquent than the words. Rosetta realised that if she remained silent the tremendous will of this old woman would stand as a colossal obstacle between Derek and Rose. Something told her that they would never surmount it, and, if they did, long years must pass, three at the least, during which innumerable changes would take place. She thought of what she had suffered, of the wakeless nights, of the dreary days, of the fruitless longing. . . .

Had she the courage to exclaim: "I am Rosetta!"?

Panoramically, the consequences of confession spread themselves before her throbbing mind.

It meant the rending of that sacred veil behind which was enshrined the saint and martyr; it would impose shocking suffering upon her sisters; it must exercise an immeasurable influence upon Rose; last and least, it would drive her from a sanctuary, from the place where she had found peace and renewed interests in life.

"You force me to say more," murmured Rosetta.

"More?"

Rosetta moved a few steps, half turning, so that the light from the north window fell upon her face. She was standing below her portrait, with her back to it. The ladies stared at her in dumb surprise. Prudence began to account for everything on the score of infirmity of mind. Mrs. Newman had lavished her strength too recklessly. She looked, poor thing! absolutely worn out. Jacqueline exclaimed:

"You are ill, you—suffer."

"I suffer, yes; but I am not ill. Bear with me a few minutes longer. Then I shall go, and I—shall—not—come—back."

The last words were sighed out, so mournfully that the tears came into Jacqueline's eyes. The sad face melted Prudence also. She was now quite sure that poor dear Mrs. Newman was the victim of an overstrained imagination. Certainly they would bear with her. She said with cheerful firmness:

"Of course you will come back. May I ring for a glass of wine? I perceive that this painful scene has been too much for you."

"No, no, it is not that. Do you remember another painful scene which took place in this room, when Mary Mauleverer came here after—after Rosetta's death ?"

"Mary told you of *that ?*"

"Yes. She wished to tell you what I must tell you now, but she couldn't. I see now that it would have been kinder to have spoken out then, but she and I were thinking not of ourselves, but of you and the child."

The low intensity of her voice, the sadness of her eyes, held the sisters beneath a spell of silence, but Prudence was saying to herself all the time: "This poor creature is mad. We must be gentle with her." Jacqueline had no such thought. Out of the darkness in which her puzzled wits were groping, light was coming. She had not recognised her sister yet, but her instincts, less curbed than Prudence's, warned her this stranger was wearing some mask, and that the mask was about to be removed. Rosetta continued:

"Did not Mary hint to you that Rosetta's loveless marriage had exposed her to temptation ?"

Prudence drew in her breath sharply; Jacqueline, leaning forward, said eagerly, "Yes."

"And you," Rosetta looked at Prudence, "refused to consider the possibility of a woman, not too strong, passionate by nature, craving ardently kindness and sympathy, yielding to temptation."

"I refused to consider it then, and I refuse to consider it now," replied Prudence.

"Ah! And yet she did yield, God help her!"

Prudence's eyes flashed into fire. With her hands clenched and trembling, with bosom heaving, she exclaimed loudly:

"I don't believe it."

"It is true. Because she knew that you would refuse to believe it, she—died."

Prudence advanced a step, perhaps unconsciously. And at that moment light came to Jacqueline. She saw Rosetta in the flesh, the Rosetta she had tended as a baby, once the dearest object on earth to her. With a cry, she flung herself between the two women.

"Prudence," she gasped, "can't you see, can't you understand? Rosetta has come back!"

"Are you mad too?"

But Jacqueline was about to emancipate herself for ever from the kindly but austere control of her senior.

"This *is* Rosetta!" she exclaimed.

Without waiting for a sign from the woman patiently standing beneath her own picture, Jacqueline threw her arms about Rosetta's neck, pressing her lips to hers, murmuring amidst her sobs: "Oh, my darling, did you think that I would not forgive you? I—I don't care what you did. It is nothing, nothing to me."

"Rosetta?" gasped Prudence. "Rosetta is dead! Yes; they are mad. Jacqueline, what are you doing? What are you saying?"

Rosetta gently disengaged the clinging arms, as she confronted her sister and her judge.

"I am Rosetta. When I left my husband with Septimus Lovibond, I became as one dead to him, and he wrote as much to you. His letter you interpreted literally. I returned to England to read my death notices. The world thought that I was dead, but the world knew that I had left Lord

Brough before my death. The world has been kind enough to keep that knowledge from you."

Then Prudence saw and believed, but she remained where she stood, with her right hand clutching her breast. In a strained voice, she muttered:

"You ran away with Septimus Lovibond?"

Rosetta bowed her head, but she felt Jacqueline pressing her hand.

"Abandoned your husband and child?"

"The child was with you. There was no place for her in her father's house, or in his heart. When Lord Brough died, I married Septimus. We assumed the name of Newman. Eighteen months ago Septimus died. That is all."

"My God!"

Jacqueline glanced at the rigid face of Prudence, and burst out again:

"All that is nothing to me, nothing."

"It is everything to me," said Prudence.

"Prudence, you must believe that I should have remained dead had it not been for my child. She shall not suffer as I have suffered. Convention, tradition are empty words to me. I shall give my Rose to the man who loves her, and whom she loves. Lord Brough never divorced me, and he died intestate. I could claim my right to a part of his estate now. Consent to the engagement of Derek and Rose, and I will go away—out of all your lives."

Jacqueline was about to speak, but Rosetta held up her hand.

"Let Prudence answer," she said quietly.

"Does Rose suspect?" Prudence asked hoarsely.

"No."

Rosetta and Jacqueline gazed at her in silence. She was pallid, of the colour of ivory, and she seemed to the two women watching her to have grown suddenly very old. But she remained rigidly erect, as if petrified into stone. Her eyes were dull ; her lips firmly compressed. The passion which had animated her a moment since had burnt itself out. Her voice was scarcely audible as she whispered :

" You would go away ? "

" Yes."

At that Jacqueline could contain herself no longer. She said clearly and finally :

" If Rosetta goes away, Prudence, I shall go with her."

" You would leave me ? "

" I can be as obstinate as you are."

Prudence raised her heavy lids. A puzzled, dazed expression suffused her eyes, such a look as may be seen in the eyes of a child to whom suddenly a horror has been revealed. For the first time in her life this old woman seemed to be straining her sight, trying to penetrate beyond thickening mists. Her voice quavered as she muttered almost to herself :

" Why did you do this terrible thing ? "

Rosetta was able to answer the question. Septimus and she had resolved the problem long ago.

" I will tell you, Prudence, although, I despair of making you see with my eyes. You believe that you have acted according to your lights, but you forget that you never allowed your light to shine properly. I remember the day when I realised the symbolism of those drawn blinds." She lifted her hand and pointed to the south windows. "Why have those blinds remained down? Because you loathe the Hog Lane—and all it represents; because the view from those windows reminds you of ugly facts. I was brought up by you in innocence and ignorance. I was taught to set an extravagant value upon refinement, upon the things of secondary importance in life. Those things may suffice some women, but I am not one of them. I am only half Mauleverer. In one sense, you were so kind to me, so devoted, so willing to sacrifice yourself for me, that I used to think my debt could never be paid; in another sense you were terribly cruel, because you kept me in the twilight which you loved, and then thrust me into blazing sunshine. Abominating evil, you brought yourself to believe that evil hardly existed for the Mauleverers. I know you were warned by a kindly soul before I married Lord Brough. You turned aside eyes and ears. You taught me what love was, you kept me in absolute ignorance of what hate might be. Till I was fifteen that was the right upbringing. After fifteen a girl ought to be taught what evil is, so that she may recognise it, even when disguised as good. I should have been less a sinner, Prudence, had you been less of a saint. I sinned greatly, and God knows that I have been punished. Septimus and I loved each other to the end, but we were not happy. Women are not happy, as you taught me, because they are good; they are good, capable of expanding to the uttermost, when they are happy."

"Yes," said Jacqueline.

"You have made my Rose happy and good.

I want her to go on being happy, and then the goodness will take care of itself. You have aroused an appetite for happiness, which must be satisfied. Victor Mauleverer will never satisfy it, never! Now—which is it to be? Am I to claim my child before all the world, or will you give her to the man she loves and let me go my way?"

Prudence did not answer. Her eyes left the face of the living woman and fixed themselves upon the portrait. Once more Rose felt the grasp of Jacqueline's hand, and through it there flowed to her heart a love that never failed, triumphant over all sin and suffering.

Prudence, open-eyed, stared at the portrait, and then at the worn face beneath it, incomparably finer than its youthful presentment. Again her right hand went to her bosom, and Jacqueline knew what the familiar gesture meant.

"You are in pain, Sister?"

"It does not matter."

"It does matter."

Jacqueline hurried into the dining-room, to fetch a phial of *sal volatile*. Rosetta saw that the pain was increasing. At once the desire to alleviate suffering, always an overmastering emotion, seized her. She gripped Prudence firmly, believing that she might fall, and supported her to the big chair. Prudence lay back, closing her eyes. Rosetta began to chafe her cold, limp hands; then, hardly conscious of what she was doing, she knelt down and began to kiss them, murmuring: "Oh, Prudence, don't you want me, as I want you?"

Very faintly, Prudence whispered back:

"Yes."

Victor Mauleverer won a D.S.O. in South Africa; and Derek went through the campaign as a war correspondent. Not till after his marriage with Rose did she learn the truth. And Derek insisted that it should be told to all Charminster. Rosetta is known as Mrs. Newman, but she lives with her sisters at the Dower House. Derek is in Parliament; he owns The Cottage, and has added nurseries to it.

To-day, Mrs. Walkington drives through Hog Lane whenever she drinks tea with the Sisters. But, as she remarked to Mrs. Hooton: "Since the Devenishes bought up the slums and rebuilt the lower end of the Lane, I find difficulty in recognising it;" and Laura Hooton replied: "Do you know that I urged upon them the propriety of calling it Rosemary Avenue, *so* appropriate, but dear Rose said that it would smell just as sweet under its old name."

The blinds are up on the south front of the Dower House.

THE END

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